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CHRISTIAN'S MISTAKE.

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BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN,"

&c. &c.

(Mrs. Craik).
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"In the awful mystery of human life, it is a consolation sometimes to believe that our mistakes, perhaps even our sins, are permitted to be instruments of our education for immortality."—ANON.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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Inscribed affectionately

to

"JOHN AND LUCY."

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CHRISTIAN'S MISTAKE.

CHAPTER I.

"So I will do my best a gude wife to be,
For Auld Robin Gray is vera kind to me."

"I THINK this will do, my dear; just listen;"—and, in a mysterious half-whisper, good Mrs. Ferguson, wife of James Ferguson, the well-to-do silversmith and jeweller, of High Street, Avonsbridge, read aloud from the sheet of paper in her hand:—

"'On the 21st instant, at the University Church, Avonsbridge, by the Reverend John Smith, the Reverend Arnold Grey, D.D., Master of Saint Bede's College, Avonsbridge, to Christian, only child of the late Edward Oakley, Esq., of that place.' Will it do? Because, if so, James will send it to 'The Times' at once."

"Better ask Dr. Grey first," answered the bride.

As she spoke, Dr. Grey turned round from

the window where he had been conversing—that is, responding to conversation—with Mr. Ferguson, chiefly on the weather; for it was a snowy December day.

This precise moment—half-an-hour after his marriage—his second marriage—is hardly a fair time to describe Dr. Arnold Grey; suffice it to say, that he was a gentleman apparently about forty-five; rather low in stature, and spare in figure, with hair already thin and iron-grey. The twenty-five years between him and his newly-married wife showed plainly—only too plainly—as she stood, in all her gracefulness of girlhood, which even her extreme pallor and a certain sharp, worn, unnaturally composed look could not destroy. He seemed struck by this. His face clouded over for a minute, and he slightly sighed. But the pain, whatever it was, was only momentary. He looked like a man who was not in the habit of acting hastily or impulsively; who never did anything without having previously fully counted the cost.

"What were you saying, Mrs. Ferguson?" said he, addressing her with the grave and somewhat formal politeness which was his natural manner, but which always somewhat awed that rather vulgar, though kind-hearted and well-meaning woman.

She put the paper into his hands. "It's the notice for 'The Times;' James and I made it up last night. James thought 'it would save you trouble, Master,—" Mrs. Ferguson always hesitated between this common university custom of address, and plain "Dr. Grey."

"Thank you; Mr. Ferguson is always kind," returned the Master of Saint Bede's.

"You see," continued Mrs. Ferguson, lowering her tone to a confidential whisper, "I thought it was better only to put 'Edward Oakley, Esquire,'—and nothing more. Wouldn't you like it to be so, sir?"

"I should like it to be exactly as—" he paused, and the colour rushed violently over his thin, worn, and yet sensitive face, as sensitive as if he had been a young man still—"exactly as Mrs. Grey pleases."

Mrs. Grey! At the sound of her new name, Christian started, and she, too, turned scarlet. Not the sweet, rosy blush of a bride, but the dark red flush of sharp physical or mental pain, which all her self-control could not hide.

"Poor dear!—poor dear!—this is a great change for her, and only a year since her father died," said Mrs. Ferguson, still in that mysterious, apologetic whisper. "But indeed, my love, you have done quite right in marrying; and don't

fret a bit about it. Never mind her, sir; she'll be better by-and-by."

This oppression of pity would have nerved any one of reserved temperament to die rather than betray the least fragment of emotion more. Christian gathered herself up — her face grew pale again, and her voice steady. She looked, not at Mrs. Ferguson, but at the good man who had just made her his wife; and any one looking at him must have felt that he was a good man — then said, gently, but determinedly,—

"If Dr. Grey has no objection, I should like to have stated my father's occupation, or my own. I do not wish to hide, or appear ashamed of either."

"Certainly not," replied Dr. Grey; and taking up the pen, he added, "'Edward Oakley, Esq., late organist of Saint Bede's." It was the last earthly memento of one who, born a gentleman and a genius, had so lived, that — as all Avonsbridge well knew — the greatest blessing which could have happened to his daughter was his death. But — as by some strange and merciful law of compensation often occurs — Christian, inheriting mind and person from him, had inherited temperament, disposition, character, from the lowly-born mother, who was everything that he was not, and who had lived just long enough

to stamp on the girl of thirteen a moral impress which could resist all after contamination, and to leave behind a lovely dream of motherhood that might, perhaps—God knows!—have been diviner than the reality.

These things, Dr. Grey, brought accidentally into contact with Christian Oakley on business matters after her father's lamentable death, speedily discovered for himself; and the result was one of those sudden resolves which in some men spring from mere passion, in others from an instinct so deep and true that they are not to be judged by ordinary rules. People call it "love at first sight," and sometimes tell wonderful stories of how a man sees, quite unexpectedly, some sweet, strange, and yet mysteriously familiar face, which takes possession of his fancy with an almost supernatural force. He says to himself, "That woman shall be my wife;" and some day, months or years after, he actually marries her—even as, within a twelvemonth, having waited silently until she was twenty-one, Dr. Grey married Christian Oakley.

But until within a few weeks ago, she herself had had no idea of the kind. She intensely respected him; her gratitude for his fatherly care and kindness was almost boundless; but marrying him—or marrying at all—was quite

foreign to all her thoughts. How things had come about, even yet she could hardly remember or comprehend. All was a perfect dream. It seemed another person, and not she, who was suddenly changed from Mrs. Ferguson's poor governess, without a friend or relative in the wide world, to the wife of the Master of Saint Bede's.

That she could have married him, or been thought to have married him, for aught but his own good and generous self,—or that the Mastership of Saint Bede's, his easy income, and his high reputation, had anything at all to do with it—never once crossed her imagination. She was so simple; her forlorn, shut-up, unhappy life had kept her, if wildly romantic, so intensely, childishly true, that whatever objection she had to Dr. Grey's offer, the idea that this could form one of them—that any one could suspect her—*her*, Christian Oakley—of marrying for money, or for a home, did not occur to her for an instant. He saw that; this lover, who, from his many years of seniority, and the experience of a somewhat hard life, looked right down into the depths of the girl's perplexed, troubled, passionate, innocent heart—and he was not afraid. Though she told him, quite plainly, that she felt for him not love, but only affection and gratitude, he had simply said, with his own tender smile, "Never mind; I love *you*:" and married her.

As she stood in her white dress, white shawl, white bonnet—all as plain as possible, but still pure bridal white, contrasting strongly with the glaring colours of that splendid drawing-room over the shop, which poor Mrs. Ferguson had done her luckless best to make as fine as possible—her tall, slender figure, harmonious movements and tones, being only more noticeable by the presence of that stout, gaudily-dressed, and loud-speaking woman, most people would have said that, though he had married a governess, a solitary, unprotected woman, with neither kith nor kin to give her dignity, earning her own bread by her own honest labour, the Master of Saint Bede's was not exactly a man to be pitied.

He rose, and having silently shown the paper to Christian, enclosed it in an envelope, and gave it to Mr. Ferguson.

"Will you take the trouble of forwarding this to 'The Times?' the latest of all your many kindnesses," said he, with that manner, innately a gentleman's, which makes the acknowledging of a favour appear like the conferring of one. Worthy James Ferguson took it as such; but he was a person of deeds, not words; and he never could quite overcome the awe with which—as an Avonsbridge person—he, the jeweller of High Street, regarded the Master of Saint Bede's.

Meanwhile, the snow, which had been falling all day, fell thicker and thicker, so that the hazy light of the drawing-room darkened into absolute gloom.

"Don't you think the children should be here?" said Mrs. Ferguson, pausing in her assiduous administration of cake and wine. "That is—I'm sure I beg your pardon, Master—if they are really coming."

"I desired my sisters to send them without fail," quietly replied the Master.

But another half-hour dragged heavily on; the bridegroom's carriage, which was to take them across country to a quiet railway station, already stood at the door, when another carriage was heard to drive up to it.

"There they are!" cried Mrs. Ferguson; and the bride, who had been sitting beside her on the sofa, passive, silent, all but motionless, started a little.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she said, in the first natural tone that had been heard in her voice all day: "I did so want to see the children."

Dr. Grey went out of the room at once, and Mrs. Ferguson had the good sense to follow taking her husband with her. "For," as she said afterwards, "the first sight of three step children, and she, poor dear, such a mere girl

must be a very unpleasant thing. For her part, she was thankful that when she married James Ferguson he was a bachelor, with not a soul belonging to him except an old aunt. She wouldn't like to be in poor Mrs. Grey's shoes—dear me, no!—with those two old ladies who have lived at the Lodge ever since the first Mrs Grey died. She wondered how on earth Miss Oakley would manage them." And upon James Ferguson's suggesting "in the same way as she managed everybody," his wife soundly rated him for saying such a silly thing, though he had, with the usual acuteness of silent people, said a wiser thing than he was aware of.

Meantime Christian was left alone, for the first time that day, and many days; for solitude was a blessing not easy to get in the Fergusons' large, bustling family. Perhaps she did not seek it—perhaps she dared not. Anyhow, during the month that had been occupied with her marriage preparations, she had scarcely been ten minutes alone, not even at night, for two children shared her room—the loving little things whom she had taught for two years, first as daily, and then as resident governess; and to whom she had persisted in giving lessons till the last.

She stood with the same fixed composedness—not composure—of manner; the quietness of a

person who, having certain things to go through, goes through them in a sort of dream, almost without recognising her own identity. Women, more than men, are subject to this strange somnambulistic mental condition, the result of strong emotion, in which they both do and endure to an extent that men would never think of, or find possible.

After a minute she moved slightly, took up and laid down a book, but still mechanically, as if she did not quite know what she was doing, until, suddenly, she caught sight of her wedding ring. She regarded it with something very like affright; tried convulsively to pull it off; but it was rather tight; and before it had passed a finger-joint, she had recollected herself, and pressed it down again.

"It is too late now. He is so good,—everybody says so. And he is so very good to me."

She spoke aloud, though she was alone in the room, or rather because she was alone, after a habit which, like all solitarily reared and dreamy persons, Christian had had all her life—her young, short life—only twenty-one years—and yet it seemed to her a whole, long, weary existence.

"If I can but make him happy! If what is left of me is only enough to make him happy."

These broken sentences were repeated more

than once, and then she stood silent, as though in a dream still.

When she heard the door open, she turned round with that still, gentle, passive smile which had welcomed Dr. Grey on every day of his brief "courting" days. It never altered, though he entered in a character not the pleasantest for a bridegroom, with his three little children, one on either side of him, and the youngest in his arms.

But there are some men, and mostly those grave, shy, and reserved men, who have always the truest and tenderest hearts, whom nothing transforms so much as to be with children, especially if the children are their own. They are given to hiding a great deal, but *the father* in them cannot be hid. Why should it? Every man who has anything really manly in his nature, knows well that to be a truly good father, carrying out by sober reason and conscience those duties which in the mother spring from instinct, is the utmost dignity to which his human nature can attain.

Miss Oakley, like the rest of Avonsbridge, had long known Dr. Grey's history; how he had married early, or (ill-natured report said) been married by, a widow lady, very handsome, and some years older than himself. However, the sharpest insinuations ever made against their

domestic bliss, were that she visited a good deal, while he was deeply absorbed in his studies. And when, after a good many childless years, she brought him a girl and boy, he became excessively fond of his children. Whether this implied that he had been disappointed in his wife, nobody could tell. He certainly did not publish his woes. Men seldom do. At the birth of a third child Mrs. Grey died, and then the widower's grief, though unobtrusive, was sufficiently obvious to make Avonsbridge put all unkindly curiosity aside, and conclude that the departed lady must have been the most exemplary and well-beloved of wives and mothers.

All this, being town's talk, Christian already knew; more she had never inquired, not even when she was engaged to him. Nor did Dr. Grey volunteer any information. The strongest and most soothing part of his influence over her was his exceeding silence. He had never troubled her with any great demonstrations, nor frightened her with questionings. From the time of their engagement he had seemed to take everything for granted, and to treat her tenderly, almost reverently, without fuss or parade, yet with the consideration due from a man to his future wife. So much so, that she had hardly missed, what indeed in her simplicity she hardly expected, the

attentions usually paid to an affianced bride from the relatives of her intended. Dr. Grey had only two, his own sister and his late wife's. These ladies, Miss Gascoigne and Miss Grey, had neither called upon nor taken the least notice of Miss Oakley. But Miss Oakley—if she thought about the matter at all—ascribed it to a fact well recognised in Avonsbridge, as in most university towns, that one might as soon expect the skies to fall, as for a college lady to cross, save for purely business purposes, the threshold of a High Street tradesman. The same cause, she concluded, made them absent from her wedding, and when Dr. Grey had said simply, "I shall desire my sisters to send the children," Christian had inquired no further. Only for a second, hanging on the brink of this first meeting with the children—her husband's children, hers that were to be—did her heart fail her, and then she came forward to meet the little group.

Letitia and Arthur were thin, prim-looking, rather plain children; but Oliver was the very picture of a father's darling, a boy that any childless man would bitterly covet, any childless woman crave and yearn for, with a longing that women alone can understand. A child who, beautiful as most childhood is, had a beauty you rarely see. Bright, frank, merry, bold; half a Bacchus and

half a Cupid, he was a perfect image of the golden age. Though three years old, he was evidently still "the baby," and rode on his father's shoulder with a glorious tyranny charming to behold.

"Who's that?" said he, pointing his fat fingers, and shaking his curls that undulated like billows of gold. "Papa, who's that?"

Hardly could there have been put by any one a more difficult question. Dr. Grey did not answer, but avoided it, taking the whole three to Christian's side, and bidding them, in a rather nervous voice, to "kiss this lady."

But that ceremony the two elder obstinately declined.

"I'm a big boy, and I don't like to be kissed," said Arthur.

"Aunty told us, since we had no mamma of our own, we were not to kiss any body but our aunts," added Letitia.

Dr. Grey looked terribly annoyed, but Christian said calmly,—

"Very well, then shake hands only. We shall be better friends by-and-by."

They suffered her to touch a little hand of each, passively rather than unwillingly, and let it go. For a minute or so the boy and girl stood opposite her, holding fast by one another, and staring with all their eyes; but they said nothing more, being

apparently very "good" children, that is, children brought up under the old-fashioned rules, which are indicated in the celebrated rhyme,—

> "Come when you're called,
> Do as you're bid:
> Shut the door after you,
> And you'll never be chid."

Therefore, on being told to sit down, they gravely took their places on the sofa, and continued to stare.

The father and bridegroom looked on, silent as they. What could he say or do? It was the natural and necessary opening up of that vexed question, second marriages, concerning which moralists, sentimentalists, and practical people argue for ever, and never come to any conclusion. Of course not, because each separate case should decide itself. The only universal rule or law, if there be one, is that which applies equally to the love before marriage; that as to a complete, mutual first love, any after love is neither likely, necessary, nor desirable; so, to any one who has known a perfect first marriage—the whole satisfaction of every requirement of heart, and soul, and human affection,—unto such, a second marriage, like a second love, would be neither right nor wrong, advisable nor unadvisable, but simply impossible.

What could he do,—the father who had just given his children a new mother, they being old enough not only to understand this, but having been previously taught, as most people are so fatally ready to teach children, the usual doctrine about stepmothers, and being quite ready to rebel against the same?

The step-mother likewise, what could she do, even had she recognised and felt all that the children's behaviour implied?

Alas! (I say "alas!" for this was as sad a thing as the other) she did not recognise it. She scarcely noticed it at all. In her countenance was no annoyance—no sharp pain, that even in that first bridal hour she was not first and sole, as every woman may righteously wish to be. There came to her no sting of regret, scarcely unnatural, to watch another woman's children already taking the first and best of that fatherly love which it would be such exquisite joy to see lavished upon her own. Alas, poor Christian! all these things passed over her as the wind passes over a bare February tree, stirring no emotions, for there were none to stir. Her predominating feeling was a vague sense of relief in the presence of the children, and of delight in the exceeding beauty of the youngest.

"This is Oliver. I remember you told me his name. Will he come to me? Children generally

do," said she, in a shy sort of way, but still holding out her arms. In her face and manner was that inexplicable motherliness which some girls have even while nursing their dolls. Some never; ay, though they may boast a houseful of children,—never!

Master Oliver guessed this by instinct, as children always do. He looked at her intently, a queer, mischievous, yet penetrating look; then broke into a broad, genial laugh, quite Bacchic, and succumbed. Christian, the solitary governess, first the worse than orphan, and then the real orphan, without a friend or relative in the world, felt a child clinging round her neck—a child towards whom, by the laws of God and man, she was bound to fulfil all the duties of a mother,—duties which, from the time when she insisted on having a "big doll," that she might dress it, not like a fine lady, but "like a baby," had always seemed to her the very sweetest in all the world. Her heart leaped with a sudden ecstasy, involuntary and uncontrollable.

"My bonny boy!" she murmured, kissing the top of that billowy curl which extended from brow to crown,—"my curl,"—for Oliver immediately and proudly pointed it out to her. "And to think that his mother never saw him. Poor thing! poor thing!"

Dr. Grey turned away to the window. What remembrances, bitter or sweet, came over the widower's heart, Heaven knows! But he kept them between himself and Heaven, as he did all things that were incommunicable and inevitable, and especially all things that could have given pain to any human being. He only said on returning,—

"I knew, Christian, from the first, that you would be a good mother to my children."

She looked up at him, the tears in her eyes, but with a great light shining in them too.

"I will try."

Poor Christian! If her hasty marriage, or any other mistake of her life, needed pardon, surely it might be won for the earnest sincerity of this vow, and for its self-forgetful, utter humility—"I will try."

For another half-hour, at her entreaty, the children stayed; though Letitia and Arthur never relaxed from their dignified decorum, further than to inform her that they were sometimes called "Titia" and "Atty;" that their nurse was named Phillis; and that she had remained in the carriage, because "she said she wouldn't come in." Still, having expected nothing, the young step-mother was not disappointed. And when the three left, Oliver having held up his rosy

mouth voluntarily for "a good large kiss," the sweetness of that caress lingered on her mouth like a chrism of consecration, sanctifying her for those new duties which seemed to have been sent to her without her choice, almost without her volition. For she often felt, when she paused to think at all, as if in the successive links of circumstances which had brought about her marriage, she had been a passive agent, led on step by step, like a person half asleep. Would she ever awake?

When Mrs. Ferguson, re-entering, ready with any amount of sympathy, found the young stepmother kissing her hand to the retreating carriage with a composed smile, which asked no condolence, and offered no confidences, the good lady was, to say the least, surprised. "But," as she afterwards confessed to at least two dozen of her most intimate friends, "there always was something so odd, so different from most young ladies, about Miss Oakley." However, to the young lady herself she said nothing, except suggesting, rather meekly, that it was time to change her dress.

"And just once more let me beg you to take my shawl—my very best—instead of your own, which you have had a year and half. Ah!" sighing, "if you had only spent more money on your wedding clothes."

"How could I?" said Christian, and stopped, seeing Dr. Grey enter. This was the one point on which she had resisted him. She could not accept her trousseau from her husband's generosity. It had been the last struggle of that fierce, poverty-nurtured independence, which nothing short of perfect love could have extinguished into happy humility, and she had held to her point, resolute and hard. So much so, that when with a quiet dignity peculiarly his own, Dr. Grey had yielded, she had afterwards almost felt ashamed. And even now a slight blush came in her cheek, when she heard him say cheerfully,—

"Do not trouble her, Mrs. Ferguson, about her shawl. You know I have taken her—that is, we have taken one another, 'for better, for worse;' and it is little matter what sort of clothes she wears."

Christian, as she passed him, gave her husband a grateful look. Grateful, alas! Love does not understand, or even recognise, gratitude.

But when the door closed after her, Dr. Grey's eyes rested on it like those of one who misses a light.

He sat down, covering his mouth,—his firmly set but excessively sensitive mouth, with his hand,—an attitude which was one of his peculiarities. For he had many, which the world excused

because of his learning; and his friends—well, because of himself.

If ever there was a man who, without the slightest obtrusiveness or self-assertion of any kind, had unlimited influence over those about him, it was Arnold Grey. Throughout a life spent entirely within his College walls, he had, from freshman to fellow, from thence to tutor, and so on to the early dignity of Mastership, the most extraordinary faculty of making people do whatsoever he liked,—ay, and enjoy the doing of it. Friends, acquaintances, undergraduates, even down to children and servants, all did, more or less, sooner or later, the good pleasure of Dr. Grey. Perhaps the secret of this was, that his "pleasure" was never merely his own. None wield such absolute power over others as those who think little about themselves.

Had circumstances, or his own inclination, led him out further into the world, he might have been noticeable there, for he had very great and varied acquirements,—more acquirements, perhaps, than originalities. He had never written a book, but he had read almost every book that ever was written,—or, at least, such was the belief current in Avonsbridge. In his study he was literally entombed in books—volumes in all languages—and Avonsbridge supposed him able to read them

all. How far this was a popular superstition, and to what length his learning really went, it is impossible to say. But nobody ever came quite to the end of it. He was a silent, modest man, who never spoke much of what he knew, or of himself in any wise. His strongest outward characteristic was quietness, both of manner, speech, motions, springing, it appeared, out of a corresponding quietness of soul. Whether it had been born with him, or through what storms of human passion and suffering he had attained to this permanent central calm, who could say? Certainly nobody knew, or was likely to know; for the Master of Saint Bede's was a person, the depth of whose nature could not be fathomed easily with any line. Possibly because, old as he was, it happened, as does happen in some lives, that the right plumb-line, by the right hand, had never been dropped yet.

As he sat, his grave eyes fixed on the ground, and his mouth covered by the long thin brown hand—the sort of hand you see in mediæval portraits of student-gentlemen—nothing of him was discernible except the gentleman and the student. Not though he sat waiting for his "two-hours' wife," whom undoubtedly he had married for love—pure love—the only reason for which any one, man or woman, old or

young, ought to dare to marry. That he could feel as very few have the power to feel, no one who was any judge of physiognomy could doubt for a moment;—yet he sat, perfectly quiet,—the quietness of a man accustomed to something safer and higher than self-suppression—self-control. When Mr. Ferguson came in, he rose and began to speak about the weather and local topics, as men do speak to one another—and better that they should!—even at such crises as weddings or funerals.

And Christian, his wife?—

She had run upstairs—run almost with her former light step, for her heart felt lightened with the childish smile of little Oliver—to the attic which for the last nine months she had occupied—the nursery, now made into a bedroom, and tenanted by herself and the two little Fergusons. No special sanctity of appropriation had it; a large, somewhat bare room, in which not a thing was her own, either to miss or leave behind. For, in truth, she had nothing of her own; the small personalities which she had contrived to drag about with her from lodging to lodging having all gone to pay debts, which she had insisted—and Dr. Grey agreed—ought to be paid before she was married. So he had taken from her the desk, the work-table, and the other valueless yet well-prized

feminine trifles, and brought her, as their equivalent, a sum large enough to pay both these debts and all her marriage expenses; which sum she, ignorant and unsuspicious, took gratefully, merely saying, "He was very kind."

She now looked round on her sole worldly possessions; the large trunk which contained her ordinary apparel, and the smaller one, in which were packed all she needed for her fortnight's marriage tour. Her travelling dress lay on the bed,—a plain dark silk,—her only silk gown, except the marriage one. She let Mrs. Ferguson array her in it, and then, with her usual mechanical orderliness, began folding up the shining white draperies and laying them in the larger trunk.

"Shall I send that direct to the Lodge, my dear?"

Christian looked up absently.

"To Saint Bede's Lodge—you know—that it may be ready for you when you come home?"

Home!—that blessed word which should send a thrill to the heart of any bride. Alas! this bride heard it quite unheeding, saying only, "Do what you think best, Mrs. Ferguson."

And then she proceeded to fasten her collar and complete the minutiæ of her dress, with that careful neatness which was an instinct with Christian, as it is with all womanly women,

though how this poor motherless girl had ever learned womanliness at all was a marvel. She answered chiefly in soft monosyllables to the perpetual stream of Mrs. Ferguson's talk, till at last the good soul could no longer restrain herself.

"Oh, my dear, if you would only speak—only let out your feelings a little. For you must feel this day so; I'm sure I do, just as if it were my own wedding-day, or Isabella's, or Sarah Jane's. And when they do come to be married, poor lambs! I hope it will be as good a match as you are making; only, perhaps, not a widower. But I beg your pardon. Oh, Miss Oakley, my dear, we shall miss you so!"

And the good woman, who had a heart—and hearts are worth something—clasped the orphan-bride to her broad bosom, and shed over her a torrent of honest tears.

"Thank you," Christian said, and returned the kiss gently, but no tears came to her eyes.

"And now," added Mrs. Ferguson, recovering herself, "I'll go and see that everything is right; and I'll get my warm tartan shawl for you to travel in. It's a terrible snowy day still. You'll come down-stairs presently."

"Yes."

But the instant Mrs. Ferguson was gone, Christian locked the door. The same look, of

more than pain—actual fear—crossed her face. She stood motionless, as if trying to collect herself, and then, with her hands all shaking, took from her travelling-trunk a sealed packet. For a second she seemed irresolute, and only a second.

"It must be done—it is right. I ought to have done it before. . . . Good-bye! for ever."

Good-bye to what—or to whom?

All that the fire revealed, as she laid the packet on it, stirring it down into a red hollow, so that not a flickering fragment should be left unconsumed, were four letters,—only four,—written on dainty paper, in a man's hand, sealed with a man's large heraldic seal. When they were mere dust, Christian rose.

"It is over now,—quite over. In the whole world there is nobody to believe in—except him. He is very good, and he loves me. I was right to marry him. Yes, quite right."

She repeated this more than once, as if compelling herself to acknowledge it, and then paused.

Christian was not exactly a religious woman, that is, she had lived among such utterly irreligious people that whatever she thought or felt upon these subjects had to be kept entirely to herself; but she was of a religious nature. She said her prayers duly, and she had one habit,—

or superstition, some might sneeringly call it,—that the last thing before she went on a journey she always opened her Bible, read a verse or two, and knelt down, if only to say, "God, take care of me, and bring me safe back again:" petitions that in many a wretched compelled wandering were not so uncalled for as some might suppose. Before this momentous journey she did the same. But, instead of a Bible, it happened to be the children's Prayer-Book which she took up; it opened at the Marriage Service, which they had been inquisitively conning over; and the first words which flashed upon Christian's eyes were those which had two hours ago passed over her deaf ears and dull, uncomprehending heart,—

"*For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother, and be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.*"

She started, as if only now she began to comprehend the full force of that awful union—"one flesh," and "till death us do part."

Mrs. Ferguson tried the door, and knocked.

"Dr. Grey is waiting, my dear. You must not keep your husband waiting."

"My husband!" and again came the wild look, as of a free creature suddenly caught, tied, and bound. "What have I done? Oh, what have I done? Is it too late?"

Ay, it was too late.

Many a woman has married with far less excuse than Christian did; married for money or position, or in a cowardly yielding to family persuasion, some one who she knew did not love her, or whom she did not love, with the only sort of love which makes marriage sacred. What agonies such women must have endured, if they had any spark of feminine feeling left alive, they themselves know. And what Christian, far more guiltless than they, also endured, during the three minutes that she kept Mrs. Ferguson waiting at the locked door, was a thing never to be spoken of, but also never to be forgotten during the longest and happiest lifetime. It was a warning that made her—even her—to the end of her days, say to every young woman she knew, "Beware! marry *for love*, or never marry at all."

When she descended, every ray of colour had gone out of her face—it was white and passionless as stone; but she kissed the children all round; gave a little present to Isabella, who had been her only bridesmaid; shook hands and said a word or two of thanks to honest James Ferguson, her "father" for the day; and then found herself driving through the familiar streets—not alone. She never would be alone any more.

With a shudder, a sense of dread indescribable,

she remembered this. All her innocent, solitary, dreamy days quite over; her happiness vanished; her regrets become a crime. The responsibility of being no longer her own, but another's,—bound fixedly and irrevocably, by the most solemn vow that can be given or taken, subject to no limitations, provisions, or exceptions, while life remained. Oh, it was awful—awful!

She could have shrieked, and leaped out of the carriage, to run wildly anywhere,—to the world's end—when she felt her hand taken, softly but gently.

"My dear!—how cold you are! Let me make you warm, if I can."

And then, in his own quiet, tender way, Dr. Grey wrapped her up in her shawl, and rolled a rug about her feet. She took no notice, submitted passively, and neither spoke a word more till they had driven on for two or three miles, into a country road leading to a village where Avonsbridge people sometimes went for summer lodgings.

Christian knew it well. There, just before her father's death, he and she had lived, for four delicious, miserable, momentous weeks. She had never seen the place since, but now she recognised it—every tree, every field, the very farm-house garden, once so bright, now lying deep in snow. She began to tremble in every limb.

"Why are we here? This is not our right road. Where are we going?"

"I did not mean to come this way, but we missed the train, and cannot reach London to-night. So I thought we would post across country to E——;" naming a quiet cathedral town, "where you can rest, and go on when or where you please. Will that do?"

"Oh, yes."

"You are not dissatisfied? We could not help missing the train, you see."

"Oh, no."

The quick, sharp, querulous answers,—the last refuge of a fictitious strength that was momentarily breaking down,—he saw it all, this good man, this generous, pitiful-hearted man, who knew what sorrow was, and who for a whole year had watched her with the acuteness which love alone teaches, especially the love which, coming late in life, had a calmness and unselfishness which youthful love rarely possesses. The sort of love which, as he had once quoted to her out of an American book, could feel, deeply and solemnly, "that if a man really loves a woman, he would not marry her for the world, were he not quite sure he was the best person she could by any possibility marry." That is, the one who loved her so perfectly that he was prepared to

take upon himself all the burthen of her future life, her happiness or sorrow, her peculiarities, shortcomings, faults, and all.

This, though, he did not speak a word, was written, plain as in a book, on the face of Christian's husband, as he watched her, still silently, for another mile, till the early winter sunset, bursting through the leaden-coloured, snowy sky, threw a faint light in at the carriage window.

Christian looked up, and closed her eyes again, in a passive hopelessness, sad to see.

Her husband watched her still. Once he sighed,—a rather sad sigh for a bridegroom, and then a light, better and holier than love, or rather the essence of all love, self-denial and self-forgetfulness, brightened up his whole countenance.

"How very tired she is; but I shall take care of her, my poor child!"

The words were as gentle as if he had been speaking to one of his own children, and he drew her to him with a tender, protecting fatherliness which seemed the natural habit of his life, such as never in her poor, forlorn life had any one shown to Christian Oakley. It took away all her doubts, all her fears. For the moment she forgot she was married, forgot everything but his goodness, his tenderness, his care over her, and her great

and sore need of the same. She turned and clung to him, weeping passionately.

"I have nobody in the whole world but you. Oh, be kind to me!"

"I will," said Arnold Grey

CHAPTER II.

"You'll love me yet! and I can tarry
Your love's protracted growing:
June reaped that bunch of flowers you carry
From seeds of April's sowing."

SAINT BEDE'S is one of the most ancient of the minor colleges of Avonsbridge. Its Foundress's sweet, pale, suffering face, clad in the close coif of the time of the Wars of the Roses, still smiles over the Fellows' table in hall, and adorns the walls of Combination-room. The building itself has no great architectural beauty, except the beauty of age. Its courts are grey and still, and its grounds small; in fact, it possesses only the Lodge garden, and a walk between tall trees on the opposite side of the Avon, which is crossed by a very curious bridge. The Lodge itself is so close to the river, that from its windows you may drop a stone into the dusky, slowly rippling, sluggish water, which seems

quieter and deeper there than at any other college past which it flows.

Saint Bede's is, as I said, a minor college, rarely numbering more than fifty gownsmen at a time, and maintaining, both as to sports and honours, a mild mediocrity. For years it had not sent any first-rate man either to boat-race, or cricket-ground, or senate-house. Lately, however, it had boasted one, quite an Admirable Crichton in his way, who, had his moral equalled his mental qualities, would have carried all before him. As it was, being discovered in offences not merely against University authority, but obnoxious to society at large, he had been "rusticated." Though the matter was kept as private as possible, its details being known only to the Master, Dean, and Tutor, still it made a nine-days' talk, not only in the College, but in the town,—until the remorseless wave of daily life, which so quickly closes over the head of either ill-doer or well-doer, closed completely over that of Edwin Uniacke.

Recovering from the shock of his turpitude, the College now reposed in peace upon its slender list of perfectly well-conducted and harmless undergraduates, its two or three tutors, and its dozen or so of grey old Fellows, who dosed away their evenings in Combination-room. Even such an event as the Master's second marriage had

scarcely power to stir Saint Bede's from its sleepy equanimity.

It was, indeed, a peaceful place. It had no grand entrance, but in a narrow back street you came suddenly upon its ancient gateway, through which you passed into a mediæval world. The clock-tower and clock, with an upright sun-dial affixed below it, marked the first court, whence, through a passage which, as is usual in colleges, had the hall on the one hand, and the buttery on the other, you entered the second court, round three sides of which ran cloisters, of very ugly, very plain, but very ancient architecture. In a corner of these cloisters was the door of the Lodge—the Master's private dwelling.

Private, it could hardly be called; for, like all these lodges of colleges, it had an atmosphere most anti-homelike, which at first struck you as extremely painful. Its ancientness, both of rooms and furniture, added to this feeling. When you passed through the small entrance-hall, up the stone staircase, and into a long, narrow, mysterious gallery, looking as it must have looked for two centuries at least, you felt an involuntary shiver, as of warm, human, daily life brought suddenly into contact with the pale ghosts of the past. You could not escape the haunting thought that these oaken tables were dined at, these high-

backed chairs sat upon, these black-framed, dirt-obscured portraits gazed at and admired, by people, once flesh and blood like yourself, who had become skeletons,—nay, mere dust, centuries before you were born. Also, that other people would be dining, sitting, gazing, and talking in this very same spot, long after you yourself had become a skeleton in your turn.

This impression of the exceeding mutability of all things, common to most very old houses, was stronger than ordinary in this house, whose owners did not even hold it by ancestral right, so as to find and leave behind some few ancestral ties and memories, but came and went, with all that belonged to them; the only trace of their occupancy and themselves being a name on the College books, or a solitary portrait on the College wall. The old dervish's saying to the Eastern king, "Sire, this is not a palace, but a caravanserai," might have been applied here only too truly. It was not a home, it was the lodge of a college.

Until eighteen months ago, the date of Dr Grey's appointment, there had not been a woman's face or a child's foot about it for a hundred and fifty years. All the Masters had been unmarried—grim, grave Fellows—advanced in years. Dr. Arnold Grey, whose fellowship had terminated early, and who had afterwards been tutor and

dean, was the youngest Master that had ever been known at Saint Bede's; and his election might consequently have been unpopular, had he not been personally so much liked, and had there not happened immediately afterwards that scandal about Edwin Uniacke. Therein he acted so promptly and wisely, that the sleepy, timid, old dons, as well as the Uniacke family—for the lad was highly connected—were thankful that this unlucky business had not occurred in the time of the late Master, who was both old and foolish, and would have made it the talk of all England, instead of hushing it up, with the prudent decision of Dr. Grey, so that now it was scarcely spoken of beyond the College walls.

Solemn, quiet, and beautiful, as if they had never known a scandal or a tragedy, slept those old walls in the moonlight, which streamed also in long bars from window to window, across the ghostly gallery before mentioned. Ghostly enough in all conscience; and yet two little figures went trotting fearlessly down it, as they did every night at eight o'clock, between the two ancient apartments now converted into dining-room and nursery. The Master's children were too familiar with these grim, shadowy corners to feel the slightest dread; besides, they were not imaginative children. To Arthur, an "ally taw," that is, a real

alabaster marble, such as he now fumbled in his pocket, was an object of more importance than all the defunct bishops, archbishops, kings, queens, and benefactors of every sort, whose grim portraits stared at him by day and night. And Letitia was far more anxious that the candle she carried should not drop any of its grease upon her best silk frock, than alarmed at the grotesque shadows it cast, making every portrait seem to follow her with its eyes, as old portraits always do. Neither child was very interesting. Letitia, with her angular figure and thin light hair, looked not unlike a diminished spectral reflexion of the Foundress herself,—that pale, prim, pre-Raphaelitish dame who was represented all over the College, in all sizes and varieties of the limner's art. Arthur, who hung a little behind his sister, was different from her, being stout and square; but he, too, was not an attractive child, and there was a dormant sullenness in his under lip which showed he could be a very naughty one if he chose.

"I told you so, Titia," said he, darting to an open door facing the staircase at the gallery's end. "There 's papa's study fire lit. I knew he was coming home to-night, though aunts won't let us sit up, as he said we should. But I will! I'll lie awake if it's till twelve o'clock, and call him as he passes the nursery door."

"You forget," said Titia, drawing herself up with a womanly air. "Papa will not be alone now. He may not care to come to you now he has got Mrs. Grey."

"Mrs. Grey!"

"You know, aunts told us always to call her so. I'm sure I don't want to call her anything. I hate her!"

"So do I," rejoined the boy, doubling up his fist with intense enjoyment. "Wouldn't I like to pitch into her for marrying papa? But yet," with a sudden compunction, "she gave us lots of cake. And she looked rather—jolly, eh?"

"Jolly!—you boys are so vulgar," said the little lady, contemptuously. "But I daresay you'll like her, for aunts say she is quite a vulgar person. As for me, I don't mean to take any notice of her at all."

"A deal she'll care for that! Who minds you? you're only a girl."

"I'm glad I'm not a big, ugly, dirty-handed, common boy."

Arthur's reply was short and summary, administered by one of those dirty hands, as he was in the habit of administering what he doubtless considered justice to his much cleverer, more precocious, and very sharp-tongued sister, even though she was "a girl." It was the only advan-

tage he had over her, and he used it; chivalry not being a thing which comes natural to most boys, and it, as well as the root and core of it, loving-kindness, not having been one of the things taught in these children's nursery.

Letitia set up an outcry of injured innocence, upon which nurse, who waited at the foot of the stairs, seeing something was amiss, while not stopping to discover what it was, did as she always did under similar circumstances,—she flew to the contending parties and soundly thumped them both.

"Get to bed, you naughty children, you're always quarrelling," rang the sharp voice, rising above Letitia's wail and Arthur's storm of furious sobs. The girl yielded, but the boy hung back; and it was not until after a regular, stand-up fight between him and the woman,—a big, sturdy woman, too,—that he was carried off, still desperately resisting, and shouting that he would have his revenge as soon as ever papa came home.

Letitia followed, quietly enough, as if the scene were too common for her to trouble herself much about it. The only other witness to it was the portrait of the mild-faced Foundress, which seemed through the shadows of centuries to look down pitifully on these motherless children, as if with a remembrance of her own two little sons, whose

sorrowful tale—is it not to be found in every English History, and why repeat it here?

Motherless children indeed these were, and had been, practically, ever since they were born. All the womanly bringing up they had had, even in Mrs. Grey's lifetime, had come from that grim nurse, Phillis.

Phillis was not an ordinary woman. The elements of a tragedy were in her low, broad, observant, and intelligent forehead, her keen black eyes, and her full-lipped, underhanging mouth. Though past thirty, she was still comely, and when she looked pleasant, it was not an unpleasant face. Yet there lurked in it possibilities of passion that made you tremble, especially considering that she had the charge of growing children. You did not wonder at her supremacy in the nursery; but you wondered very much that any mother could have allowed her to acquire it.

For the rest, Phillis had entered the family as Letitia's wet-nurse, with the sad story of most wet-nurses. Her own child having died, she took to her foster-child with such intensity of devotedness as to save Mrs. Grey all trouble of loving or looking after the little creature from henceforward. And so she stayed, through many storms and warnings to leave, but she never did leave—she was too necessary. And in one sense Phillis did her duty. Physically, no children could be

better cared for than the little Greys. They were always well washed, well clad, and, in a certain external sense, well managed. The "rod in pickle," which Phillis always kept in the nursery, maintained a form of outward discipline, and even manners, so far as Phillis knew what manners meant; morals too, in Phillis's style of morality. Beyond that, Phillis's own will—strong and obstinate as it was—made laws for itself, which the children were obliged to obey. They rebelled; sometimes they actually hated her, and yet she had great influence over them—the earliest and closest influence they had ever known. Besides, the struggle had only begun when they were old enough to have some sense of the difference between justice and injustice, submission compelled and obedience lawfully won; to infants and little children Phillis was always very tender,—nay, passionately loving.

She was so to Oliver, who, wakening at the storm in the nursery, took to sleepy crying, and was immediately lulled in her arms with the fondest soothing; the fiercest threatenings between whiles being directed to Letitia and Arthur, until they both slunk off to bed, sullen and silent—at war with one another, with Phillis, and with the whole world.

But children's woes are transient. By-and-by Titia's fretful face settled into sleepy peace; the

angry flush melted from Arthur's hot cheeks; Oliver had already been transferred to his crib; and Phillis settled herself to her sewing, queen regnant of the silent nursery.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the ghostly gallery, sat, over the dining-room fire, the two other rulers, guardians, and guides of these three children—"the aunts"—Miss Gascoigne and Miss Grey. For these ladies still remained at the Lodge. Dr. Grey had asked Christian if she wished them to leave, for they had a house of their own near Avonsbridge, and she had answered indifferently, "Oh, no; let them do as they like." As *she* liked did not seem to enter into her thoughts. Alas! that sacred dual solitude, which most young wives naturally and rightfully desire, was no vital necessity to Christian Grey.

So the two ladies, who had come to the Lodge when their sister died, had declared their intention of remaining there, at least for the present, "for the sake of those poor dear children." And, dressed in all their best, they sat solemnly waiting the arrival of the children's father and stepmother,—"that young woman," as they always spoke of her in Avonsbridge.

What Dr. Grey had gone through in domestic opposition before he married, he alone knew, and he never told. But he had said, as every man

under similar circumstances has a right to say, "I *will* marry," and had done it. Besides, he was a just man; he was fully aware that to his sisters Christian was not—could not be as yet, any more than the organist's daughter and the silversmith's governess, while they were University ladies. But he knew them, and he knew her; he was not afraid.

They were a strong contrast these two, the ladies at the Lodge. Miss Grey, the elder, was a little roly-poly woman, with a meek, round, fair-complexioned face, and pulpy, soft hands: one of those people who irresistibly remind one of a white mouse. She was neither clever nor wise, but she was very sweet-tempered. She had loved Dr. Grey all her life. From the time that she, a big girl, had dandled him, a baby, in her lap; throughout her brief youth, when she was engaged to young Mr. Gascoigne, who died; up to her somewhat silly and helpless middle-age,—there never was anybody, to Miss Grey, like "my brother Arnold." Faithfulness is a rare virtue; let us criticise her no more, but pass her over, faults and all.

Miss Gascoigne was a lady who could not be passed over on any account. Nothing would have so seriously offended her. From her high nose to her high voice and her particularly high tem-

per, everything about her was decidedly *prononcé*. There was no extinguishing her or putting her into a corner. Rather than be unnoticed—if such a thing she could ever believe possible—she would make herself noticeable in any way, even an ill way. She was a good-looking woman, and a clever woman too, only not quite clever enough to find out one slight fact—that there might be anybody in the world superior to herself.

> "Set down your value at your own huge rate,
> The world will pay it"—

for a time. And so the world had paid it, pretty well, to Miss Gascoigne, but was beginning a little to weary of her; except fond Miss Grey, who still thought that, as there never was a man like "dear Arnold," so there was not a woman anywhere to compare with "dear Henrietta."

There is always something pathetic in this sort of alliance between two single women unconnected by blood. It implies a substitution for better things—marriage or kindred ties; and has in some cases a narrowing tendency. No two people, not even married people, can live alone together for a number of years without sinking into a sort of double selfishness; ministering to one another's fancies, humours, and even faults, in a way that is not

possible, or probable, in the wider or wholesomer life of a family. And if, as is almost invariably the case, indeed otherwise such a tie beween women could not long exist, the stronger governs the weaker, one domineers and the other obeys, the result is bad for both. It might be seen in the fidgetty restlessness of Miss Gascoigne, whose eyes, still full of passionate fire, lent a painful youthfulness to her faded face,—and in the lazy supineness of Miss Grey, who seemed never to have an opinion or a thought of her own. This was the dark side of the picture; the bright side being that it is perfectly impossible for two women, especially single women, to live together in friendship and harmony for nearly twenty years without a firm basis of moral worth existing in their characters, producing a fidelity of regard which is not only touching but honourable to both.

They sat, one on either side the fire, in the long unbroken silence of people who are so used to one another that they feel no necessity for talking, until Miss Gascoigne spoke first, as she always did.

"I wonder what Dr. Grey meant by desiring the children to be kept out of their beds till his return. As if I should allow it! And to order a tea-dinner! No wonder Barker looked aston-

ished. He never knew my poor sister have anything but a proper dinner, at the proper hour; but it's just that young woman's doing. In her position, of course she always dined at one o'clock."

"Very likely," said Miss Grey, assentingly. Dissent she never did, in anything, from anybody, least of all from Miss Gascoigne.

That lady fidgetted again; poked the fire, regarded herself in the mirror, and settled her cap —no, her head-dress, for Miss Grey always insisted that "dear Henrietta" was too young to wear caps, and admired fervently the still black —too black hair, the mystery of which was only known to Henrietta herself.

"What o'clock is it?—half-past nine, I declare. Most annoying—most impertinent—to keep us waiting for our tea in this way. Your brother never did it before."

"I hope there is no accident," said Miss Grey, looking up alarmed. "The snow might be dangerous on the railway."

"Maria, if you had any sense—but, I think, you have less and less every day—you would remember that they are not coming by rail at all,—of course not. On the very first day of Term, when Dr. Grey would meet so many people he knew; and to have to introduce his wife! Why, everybody would have laughed at him: and no

wonder. Verily, there 's no fool like an old fool."

"Henrietta!" pitifully appealed the sister. "You know dear Arnold is not a fool. He never did a foolish thing in his life,—except, perhaps, in making this unfortunate marriage. And she may improve. Anybody ought to improve who had the advantage of living constantly with dear Arnold."

Miss Gascoigne—always on the watch for affronts—turned sharply round, but there was not a shadow of satire in her friend's simplicity. "My dear Maria, you are the greatest——"

But what Miss Grey was, remained among the few bitter speeches that Miss Gascoigne left unsaid, for at that moment the heavy oak door was thrown wide open, and Barker, the butler (time-honoured institution of Saint Bede's, who thought himself one of its strongest pillars of support), repeated, in his sonorous voice,—

"The Master and Mrs. Grey."

Thus announced—suddenly and formally, like a stranger, in her own house—Christian came home.

The two maiden aunts rose ceremoniously. Either their politeness sprang from their natural habit of good-breeding, or it was wrung from them by extreme surprise. The apparition before

them—tall, graceful, and dignified—could by no means be mistaken for anything but a lady. Such a lady as Avonsbridge, with all its aristocracy of birth and condition, rarely produced. She would have been the same, even if attired in hodden grey, but now she was well dressed, in silks and furs:—Dr. Grey had smiled at the modest trousseau, and soon settled everything by saying, "My wife must wear so and so." In this rich clothing, which set off her fair large Saxon beauty to the utmost advantage, Christian quite dazzled the eyes of the two ladies who had so persistently called her "that young woman." Any person with eyes at all could see that, except for the difference in age, there was not the slightest incongruity between (to follow Barker's pompous announcement) "the Master and Mrs. Grey."

Dr. Grey's personal introduction was brief enough: "Christian, these are my sisters. This is Maria, and this is Henrietta—Miss Gascoigne."

Christian bowed—a little stately, perhaps—and then held out her hand, which, after a hesitating glance at Miss Gascoigne, was accepted timidly by Miss Grey. "I couldn't help it, my dear," she afterwards pleaded, in answer to a severe scolding; "she quite took me by surprise."

But in Miss Gascoigne's acuter and more worldly nature the surprise soon wore off, leaving a sharp consciousness of the beauty, grace, and dignity,—formidable weapons in the hands of any woman, and especially of one so young as the Master's wife. Not that her youth was now very noticeable: to any one who had known Christian before her marriage, she would have appeared greatly altered, as if some strange mental convulsion had passed over her,—passed, and been subdued. In two weeks she had grown ten years older —was a matron, not a girl. Yet still she was herself. We often come to learn that change—which includes growth—is one of the most blessed laws of existence; but it is only weak natures who, in changing, lose their identity. If Dr. Grey saw, what any one who loved Christian could not fail to have seen, this remarkable change in her, he also saw deep enough into her nature neither to dread it nor deplore it.

A few civil speeches having been interchanged about the weather, their journey, and so forth, the Master, suddenly looking round him, inquired, "Maria, where are the children?"

"I sent them to bed," said Miss Gascoigne, with dignity. "It was impossible they could be kept up till this late hour. My poor sister never allowed it."

The colour flashed violently over Dr. Grey's face. With the quick, resolute movement of a master in his own house, he crossed the room and rang the bell.

"Barker, inquire of nurse if the children are in bed. If not, say I wish them sent down to me; otherwise, I will come up to them immediately."

The answer to this message was awaited in most awkward silence. Even Miss Gascoigne seemed to feel that she had gone a little too far, and busied herself over the tea-equipage; while Miss Grey, after one or two deprecating looks at dear Arnold, began knitting nervously at her eternal socks,—the only aunt-like duty which, in her meek laziness, she attempted to fulfil towards the children.

For Christian, she sat by the fire, where her husband had placed her, absently taking in the externalities—warm, sombre, luxurious—of the house, which, in all human probability, was now her home for life. For life! Did that overpowering sense of the inevitable—so maddening to some, so quieting to others—cause all small things to sink to their natural smallness, and all painful things to touch her less painfully than otherwise they would have been felt? It might have been.

Barker returned with the information that all

the children were fast asleep, but nurse said, "Of course Dr. Grey could come up if he pleased."

"Let me go, too," begged Christian. "Little Oliver will look so pretty in his bed."

Dr. Grey smiled. It was a rare thing to be a whole fortnight away from his children, and all the father's heart was in his loving eyes. "Come away then," he said; all his cheerful looks returning. "Aunts, you will give us our tea when we return."

"Well, she does make herself at home!" cried Miss Gascoigne indignantly, almost before the door had closed.

Miss Grey knitted half a row with a perplexed air, and then, as if she had lighted upon a perfect solution of the difficulty, said brightly, "But then, you see, dear Henrietta, she *is* at home."

Home! Through that chilly gallery, preceded by Barker and his wax-lights; stared upon by those grim portraits, till more than once she started as if she had seen a ghost; up narrow, steep, stone staircases, which might lead to a prison in a tower, or a dormitory in a monastery,—anywhere except to ordinary, natural bed-chambers. And when she reached them, what gloomy rooms they were, leading one out of another, up a step and down a step, with great beds that seemed only fit to lie in state in, after having turned

one's face to the wall and slipped out of weary life into the imagined freedom of the life beyond. Home! If that was home, Christian shivered.

"Are you cold?—Barker, send Mrs. Grey's maid with her warm shawl. Everybody feels the Lodge cold at first, but you will get used to it. Wait one minute," for she was pressing eagerly to the gleam of light through the half-opened nursery-door. "My wife!"

"Yes, Dr. Grey."

As he put his hands on her shoulders, Christian looked into his eyes,—right into them, for she was as tall as he. There was a sad quietness in her expression, but there was no shrinking from him, and no distrust.

"My wife need never be afraid of anything or anybody in this house.

"I know that."

"And, by-and-by, many things here which feel strange now will cease to feel so. Do you believe this?"

She smiled—a very feeble smile; but, at least, there was no pretence in it.

"One thing more. Whatever goes wrong, you will always come at once and tell it to me,—to nobody in the world but me? Remember."

"I will."

Dr. Grey leaned forward and kissed his wife—

in his inexpressibly tender way—and then they went in together.

Letitia and Arthur occupied two little closets leading out of the nursery, which seemed spacious enough, and ancient enough, to have been the dormitory of a score of monks,—as very likely it was in the early days of Saint Bede's. Phillis, sewing by her little table in the far corner, kept guard over a large bed, where, curled up like a rose-bud, flushed and warm, lay that beautiful child whom Christian had thought of twenty times a-day for the last fortnight.

"Well, Phillis, how are you and your little folk?" said the Master, in a pleasant whisper, as he crossed the nursery floor. He trod lightly, but either his step was too welcome to remain undiscovered, or the children's sleep had been "fox's sleep," for there arose a great outcry of "Papa!—papa!" Oliver leaped up, half laughing, half screaming, and kicking his little bare legs with glee as his father took him in his arms; Arthur came running in, clad in the very airiest costume possible, and Letitia appeared sedately a minute or two afterwards, having stopped to put on her warm scarlet dressing-gown, and to take off her nightcap;—under the most exciting circumstances Titia was such an exceedingly "proper" child.

What would the Avonsbridge dons have said?

—the solitary old Fellows in Combination-room—and, above all, what would the ghosts of the gloomy old monks have said, could they have seen the Master of Saint Bede's, with all his children round him, hugging him, kissing him, chattering to him, while he hung over them in an absorption of enjoyment so deep that, for the moment, Christian was unnoticed? But only for a moment,—and he turned to where she stood, a little aloof, looking on, half sadly, and yet with beaming, kindly eyes. Her husband caught her hand and drew her nearer.

"Children, you remember this lady. She was very good to you one day lately. And now I want you to be very good to her."

"Oh, yes," cried Oliver, putting up his mouth at once for a kiss. "I like her very much. Who is she? What is her name?"

Children ask sometimes the simplest, yet the most terrible of questions. This one seemed literally impossible to be answered. Dr. Grey tried, and caught sight of his daughter's face,—the mouth pursed into that hard line which made her so exactly like her mother. Arthur, too, looked sullen and shy. Nobody spoke but little Oliver, who, in his innocent, childish way, pulling Christian's dress, repeated again, "What is your name? What must Olly call you?"

Whatever she felt, her husband must have felt and known that this was the critical moment which, once let slip, might take years afterwards to recall. He said, nervously enough, but with a firmness that showed he must already have well considered the subject,—

"Call her Mamma."

There was no reply. Christian herself was somewhat startled, but conscious of a pleasant thrill at the sound of the new name coming upon her so suddenly. Strange it was; and ah! how differently it came to her from the way it comes upon most women—gradually, deliciously, with long looking forward and tremulous hope and fear—still it was pleasant. Her maternal instinct was so strong that even imaginary motherhood seemed sweet. She bent forward to embrace the children, with tears in her eyes, when Letitia said, in a sharp, unchildlike voice,—

"People can't have two mammas. And our mamma is buried in the New Cemetery,—aunts took us there yesterday afternoon."

Had the little girl chosen the sharpest arrow in her aunts' quiver,—nay, had she been Miss Gascoigne herself—she could not have shot more keenly home. For the dart was barbed with *truth*—literal truth; which, however sore it be, people in many difficult circumstances of life are

obliged to face, to recognise, and abide by; to soften and subdue if they can,—but woe betide them if, by any cowardly weakness or short-sighted selfishness, they are tempted to deny it as truth, or to overlook and make light of it!

Painful as the position was—so painful that Dr. Grey was quite overcome by it, and maintained a total silence—Christian had yet the sense to see that it was a position inevitable, because it was true. Bitterly as the child had spoken—with the bitterness which she had been taught—yet she had only uttered a fact. In one sense, nobody could have two mothers; and Christian, almost with contrition, thought of the poor dead woman whose children were now taught to call another woman by that sacred name. But the pang passed—had she known the first Mrs. Grey, it might not have been so sharp; in any case, here was she herself—Dr. Grey's wife and the natural guardian of his children. Nothing could alter that fact. Her lot was cast—her duty was clear before her—she must accept it and bear it, whatever it might be. Perhaps, for some reasons, it was the better for her that it was rather hard.

She looked at her husband, saw how agitated he was, and there seemed to come into her mind a sort of inspiration.

"My child," she said, trying to draw Letitia

towards her, "You say truly. I am not your own mamma; no one ever could be that to you again; but I mean to be as like her as I can. I mean to love you and take care of you; and you will love me too, by-and-by. You can always talk to me as much as ever you like about your own mamma."

"She doesn't remember her one bit," said Arthur, contemptuously.

"Oh, yes, I do," cried Letitia. "She was very pretty, and always wore such beautiful gowns."

Again there was a silence, and then Christian said,—

"I think, if the children do not dislike it, that as they always called Mrs. Grey 'mamma,' they had better call me 'mother.' It is a pleasanter word than stepmother. And I hope to make myself a real mother to them before very long."

"I know you will," answered Dr. Grey, in a smothered voice, as he set down little Oliver, and, kissing the children all round, bade nurse carry them off to bed once more. Nurse, who, standing apart, with her great black eyes had already taken the measure of the new wife, of the children's future, and of the chances of her own authority. Not the smallest portion of this decision originated in the fact that Christian, wholly

preoccupied as she was, had entered the nursery and quitted it without taking any notice of her—Phillis—at all.

Dr. Grey preceded his wife to a room, which, in the long labyrinth of apartments, seemed almost a quarter of a mile away. A large fire burnt on the old-fashioned hearth, and glimmered cheerily on the white toilet-table, crimson sofa, and bed. It was a room comfortable, elegant, pleasant, bright, thoroughly "my lady's chamber," and which seemed from every nook to welcome its new owner with a smile.

"Oh, how pretty!" exclaimed Christian, involuntarily. She was not luxurious, yet she dearly loved pretty things; the more so because she had never possessed them. Even now, though her heart was so moved and full, she was not insensible to the warmth imparted to it by mere external pleasantnesses like these.

"I had the room newly furnished. I thought you would like it," said Dr. Grey.

"I do like it. How very kind you are to me!"

Kind,—only kind!

She looked round the room, and there, in one corner, just as if she had never parted from them, were all the old treasures of her maidenhood,—desk, work-table, chair. She guessed all the secret. Once, perhaps, she might have burst

into tears,—heart-warm tears; now she only sighed.

"Oh, how good you are!"

Her husband kissed her. Passively she took the caress, and again she sighed. Dr. Grey looked at her earnestly, then spoke in much agitation,—

"Christian, tell me truly, were you hurt at what occurred just now? I mean in the nursery."

"No; not in the least. It was inevitable."

"It was. Many things in life, quite inevitable, have yet to be met and borne, conquered even, if we can."

"Ay, *if* we can!"

And Christian looked up wistfully, almost entreatingly, to her husband, who, she now knew, and trembled at the knowledge, so solemn was the responsibility it brought, had loved her, and did love her, with a depth and passion such as a man like him never loves but one woman with in all his life.

"Christian," he began again, with an effort. "I want to say something to you. Once in my life, when I was almost as young as you are, I made a great mistake. Therefore, I know that mistakes are not irretrievable. God teaches us sometimes by our very errors, leading us through them into light and truth. Only we must follow Him, and hold fast to the right, however difficult it may be.

We must not be disheartened; we must leave the past where it is, and go on to the future; do what we have to do, and suffer all we have to suffer. We must meet things as they are, without perplexing ourselves about what they might have been. For, if we believe in an overruling Providence at all, there can be no such possibility as 'might have been.'"

"That is true," said Christian, musingly. She had never known Dr. Grey speak like this. She wondered a little why he should do it now; and yet his words struck home. That "great mistake"—was it his first marriage? which, perhaps, had not been a happy one. At least, he never spoke of it, or of his children's mother. And besides, it was difficult to believe that any man could have loved two women, as, Christian knew and felt, Dr. Grey now loved herself.

But she asked him no questions; she felt not the slightest curiosity about that, or about anything. She was like a person in a state of moral catalepsy, to whom, for the time being, every feeling, pleasant or painful, seems dulled and dead.

Dr. Grey said no more; and what he had said was evidently with great effort. He appeared glad to go back into ordinary talk, showing her what he had done in the room, to make it pretty and pleasant for his bride, and smiling over her

childish delight to see again her maiden treasures with which she had parted so mournfully.

"You could not think I meant you really to part with them, Christian?" said he. "I fancied you had found out my harmless deceit long ago. But you are such an innocent baby, my child; as clear as crystal, and as true as steel."

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, as he went out of the room,—a cry that was almost a sob, and might have called him back again—but he was gone, and the moment had passed by. With it passed the slight quivering and softening which had been visible in her face, and she sunk again into the impassive calm which made Christian Grey so totally different from Christian Oakley.

She rose up, took off her bonnet and shawl, and arranged her hair, looking into the mirror with eyes that evidently saw nothing. Then she knelt before the fire, warming her ice-cold hands, on which the two weeks' familiar ring seemed to shine with a fatal glitter. She kept moving it up and down, with a nervous habit that she was trying vainly to conquer.

"A mistake," she muttered. "Perhaps my marriage, too, was a mistake, irretrievable, irremediable; as he may himself think now, only he is too kind to let me see it. What am I to do? Nothing. I can do nothing. 'Until death us do

part.' Do I wish for death,—my death of course, to come and part us?"

She could not, even to herself, answer that question.

"What was he saying,—that God teaches us by our very errors,—that there is no such thing as 'might have been?' He thinks so, and he is very wise, far wiser and better than I am. I might have loved him. Oh! that I had only waited till I did really love him, instead of fancying it enough that he loved me. But I must not think. I have done with thinking. It would drive me out of my senses."

She started up, and stood gazing round the cheerful, bright, handsome room, where every luxury that a comfortable income could give had been provided for her comfort, every little fancy and taste she had been remembered, with a tender mindfulness that would have made the heart of any newly-married wife, married for love, leap with joy; and look forward hopefully to that life which, with all its added cares, a good man's affection can make so happy to the woman who is his chosen delight. But in Christian's face was no happiness; only that white, wild, frightened look which had come on her marriage day, and then settled down into what she now wore —the aspect of passive submission and endurance.

"But I will do my duty. And he will do his, no fear of that! He is so good,—far better than I. Yes; I shall do my duty."

"*Faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*"

There is a deeper meaning in this text than we at first see. Of "these three," two concern ourselves; the third concerns others. When faith and hope fail, as they do sometimes, we must try charity, which is love in action. We must speculate no more on our duty, but simply do it. When we have done it, however blindly, perhaps Heaven will show us the reason why.

Christian went downstairs, slowly and sadly, but quite calmly, to spend,—and she did spend it, painlessly, if not pleasantly,—the first evening in her own home.

CHAPTER III.

When ye're my ain gudewife, lassie,
What'll ye bring to me?
A hantle o' siller, a stockin' o' gowd?—
"I haena ae bawbee."

When ye are my ain gudewife, lassie,
And sit at my fireside,
Will the red and white meet in your face?—
"Na! ye'll no get a bonnie bride."

But gin ye're my ain gudewife, lassie,
Mine for gude an' ill,
Will ye bring me three things, lassie,
My empty hame to fill?

A temper sweet, a silent tongue,
A heart baith warm and free?
Then I'll marry ye the morn, lassie,
And loe ye till I dee.

AVONSBRIDGE lay still deep in February snow, for it was the severest winter which had been known there for many years. But any one who is acquainted with the place, must allow that it never looks better or more beautiful than in a fierce winter frost—too fierce

to melt the snow; when, in early morning, you may pass from College to College, over quadrangles, courts, and gardens, and your own footsteps will be the only mark on the white, untrodden carpet which lies glittering and dazzling before you, pure and beautiful as even country snow.

A little later in the morning, you may meet a few gyps and bed-makers coming round chance corners, or descending mysterious stairs; but if you go beyond inhabited precincts, down to the river-side, you are almost sure to be quite alone; you may stand, as Christian was accustomed to do, on any one of the bridges which connect the College buildings and College grounds, and see nothing but the little robin hopping about and impressing tiny footprints after yours in the path, —then flying on to the branches of the nearest willow, which, heavy with a weight that is not leaves but snow, dips silently into the silenced water.

Or you may gaze, as Christian gazed every morning with continually new wonder, at the colours of the dawn brightening into sunrise, such as it looks on a winter's morning; so beautiful that it seems an almost equal marvel that nobody should care to see it but yourself—except perhaps a solitary gownsman, a reading man, taking his usual constitutional, just as a matter of duty,

but apparently not enjoying it the least in the world.

Not enjoying it—this sharp fresh air, which braces every nerve, and invigorates every limb, causing all the senses to awake and share, as it were, this daily waking up of Nature, fresh as a rose? For what rosiness, in the brightest summer days, can compare with that kiss of the winter's sun on the tree-tops, slowly creeping down their trunks and branches? And what blueness, even of a June sky, can equal that sea of space up aloft, across which, instead of shadows and stars, pink and lilac morning clouds are beginning to sail, clearer and brighter every minute? As they have sailed for the last four centuries over the pinnacle of that wondrous chapel, which has been described in guide-books, and pictured in engravings to an overwhelming extent, yet is still a building of whose beauty, within and without, the eye never tires.

Christian stood watching it, for the hundredth time, with that vague sensation of pleasure which she felt at sight of all lovely things, whether of nature or art. That, at least, had never left her; she hoped it never might. It was something to hold by, though all the world slid by like a dream. Very dreamy her life felt still, though she had tried to make it more real and natural,

by resuming some of her old ways, and especially her morning walk, before the nine o'clock breakfast at the Lodge.

She had made a faint protest in favour of an earlier hour than nine, and begged that the children might come down to breakfast; she craved so to have the little faces about the table. But Miss Gascoigne had said solemnly that "my poor dear sister always breakfasted at nine, and never allowed her children to breakfast anywhere but in the nursery." And that reference, which was made many times a-day, invariably silenced Christian.

She had now been married exactly four weeks; but it seemed like four years,—four ages; as if she hardly remembered the time when she was Christian Oakley. Yet now and then, in a dim sort of way, her old identity returned to her, as it does to those who after a great crisis and uprooting of all life, submit, some in despair, some in humble patience, to the inevitable.

This good time, this lucid interval, so to speak, usually came to her in the morning, when she took her early walk in the familiar places—for to Christian familiarity only made things more dear. Already she was beginning to find her own nooks, and go about her own ways, in those grim College-rooms, which grew less ghostly

now that she knew them better. Already she was getting a little used to her new name, her formal dignities, and her handsome clothes. It was a small thing to think of perhaps; and yet as she walked across the College quadrangles, remembering how often she had shivered in her thin shawl along these very paths, the rich fur cloak felt soft and warm, like her husband's goodness and unfailing love.

As she stepped with her light, firm tread across the crinkling snow, she was—not unhappy. In her still dwelt that well-spring of healthy vitality which always, under all circumstances, responds more or less to the influence of the cheerful morning, the stainless childhood of the day. No wonder the "reading-man," who had been so insensible to the picturesque in nature, turned his weary eyes to look after her; or that a bevy of freshmen, rushing wildly out of chapel, with their surplices flying behind them like a flock of white—geese?—should have stopped to stare, a little more persistently than gentlemen ought, at the solitary lady, who was walking where she had a perfect right to walk, and at an hour when she could scarcely be suspected of promenading either to observe or to attract observation. But Christian went right on, with perfect composure. She knew she was handsome, for she had been told so once; but the knowledge had after-

wards become only pain. Now she was indifferent to her looks,—at least as indifferent as any womanly woman ever can be, or ought to be. Still, it vexed her a little that these young men should presume to stare, and she was glad she was not walking in Saint Bede's, and that they were not the men of her own College.

For already she began to appropriate "our College"—those old walls, under the shadow of which all her future life must pass. As she entered the narrow gateway of Saint Bede's, and walked round its chilly cloisters to the Lodge door, she tried not to remember that she had ever thought of life as anything different from this, or had ever planned an existence of boundless enjoyment, freedom, and beauty, travel in foreign countries, seeing of mountains, cities, pictures, palaces; hearing of grand music, and mingling in brilliant society—a phantasmagoria of delight which had visited her fancy once;—was it only her fancy? and vanished in a moment, as completely as the shadows projected on the wall. And here she was, the wife of the Master of Saint Bede's.

"Still I was right—I was right," she said to herself in the eagerness of a vain assurance. "And whether I was right or wrong matters not now. I must bear it—I must do my duty—and I will!"

She stood still a minute to calm herself, then

knocked at the Lodge-gate. Barker opened it with that look of grieved superior surprise with which he always obeyed any novel order, or watched the doing of any deed which he considered lowered the dignity of himself and the College.

"A beautiful morning, Barker!"

"Is it, ma'am? So one of the bed-makers was a-saying;" as if to imply that bed-makers were the only women whose business it was to investigate the beauties of the morning.

Christian smiled: she knew she was not a favourite with him; indeed, no women were. He declared that no petticoat ought ever to be seen within College boundaries. But he was a decent man, with an overwhelming reverence for Dr. Grey; and so, though he was never too civil to herself, Christian felt a kindness for honest old Barker.

She was a minute or two late; the Master had already left his study, and was opening the large book of prayers. Nevertheless, he looked up with a smile, as he always did the instant his wife's foot entered the door. But his sister appeared very serious, and Miss Gascoigne's aspect was a perfect thundercloud, which broke into lightning the instant prayers were over.

"I must say, Mrs. Grey, you have a most

extraordinary propensity for morning walks. I never did such a thing in all my life, nor Maria neither."

"Probably not," answered Christian, as she took her seat before the urn, which gave her the one home-like feeling she had at the Lodge. "Different people have different ways, and this has always been mine."

"Why so?"

"Because it does me good; and it harms nobody else," said Christian, smiling.

"I doubt that, anyhow; you never will make me believe it can be good for you to do a thing nobody else does,—to go wandering about streets and colleges when all respectable people are still in their beds. To say the least of it, it is so very peculiar."

The tone, more even than the words, made Christian flush up, but she did not reply. She had already learnt not to reply to these sharp speeches of Miss Gascoigne's, which, she noticed, fell on everybody alike. "What Miss Grey bears I suppose I can," thought she to herself, when many times during the last two weeks she had been addressed in a manner which somewhat surprised her, as being a mode of speech more fitting from a school-mistress to a naughty school-girl than from a sister to a young wife, or, indeed, from

any lady to any other lady,—at least, according to her code of manners.

"You may talk as you like," continued Miss Gascoigne, glancing at the far end of the room, where the Master was deeply busied in searching for a book, "but I object to these morning walks; and I am certain Dr. Grey also would object, if he knew of them."

"He does know."

"And does he approve? Impossible! Only think, Maria, if our poor dear sister had done such a thing."

"Oh, hush, Henrietta!" cried Maria, appealingly, as Dr. Grey came back and sat placidly down at the breakfast-table, with his big book beside him. He had apparently not heard a single word.

Yet he looked so good and sweet—yes, sweet is the only fitting word: a gentle simplicity like a child's, which always seemed to hover round this bookish, learned man,—that the women-kind were silenced—as, by a most fortunate instinct, women generally are, in presence of their masculine relatives. They may quarrel enough among themselves, but they seem to feel that men either will not understand it, or not endure it. That terrible habit of "talking over," by which most

women "nurse their wrath and keep it warm," is happily to men almost impossible.

Breakfast was never a lively meal at the Lodge. After the first few days Dr. Grey took refuge in his big book, which for years Miss Gascoigne averred he had always kept beside him at meal-times. Not good behaviour in a pater-familias, but the habit told its own tale. Very soon Christian neither marvelled at nor blamed him.

Never in all her life, not even during the few months that she lived with the Fergusons, had she sat at a family table; yet she had always had a favourite ideal of what a family table ought to be. Bright, cheerful, a sort of domestic altar, before which every one cast down his or her offering, great or small, of pleasantness and peace; where for at least a brief space in the day, all annoyances were laid aside, all stormy tempers hushed; all quarrels healed; every one being glad and content to sit down at the same board, and eat the same bread and salt, making it, whether it were a fatted calf or a dinner of herbs, equally a joyful, almost sacramental meal.

This was her ideal, poor girl! Now, she wondered, as she had done many times since her coming "home," if all family tables were like this one; shadowed over with gloomy looks, frozen

by silence, or broken by sharp speeches which darted about like little arrows pointed with poison, or buzzed here and there like angry wasps, settling and stinging unawares, and making every one uncomfortable, not knowing who might be the next victim stung. True, there was but one person to sting; for Miss Grey never said ill-natured things; but then she said ill-advised and *mal-apropos* things, and she had such an air of frightened dumbness, such a sad, deprecatory look, that she was sometimes quite as trying as Miss Gascoigne, who spoke out. And oh, how she did speak! Christian, who had never known many women, and had never lived constantly with any, now for the first time learnt what was meant by "a woman's tongue."

At first it simply astonished her. How it was possible for one mortal member to run on so long without a pause, and in such ugly and uneasy paths,—for the conversation was usually fault-finding of persons or things,—passed her comprehension! Then she felt a little weary, and half wished that she, too, had a big book into which she could plunge herself, instead of having to sit there, politely smiling, saying "Yes," and "No," and "Certainly." At last she sank into a troubled silence; tried to listen as well as she could, and yet allow the other half of her mind to wander away

into some restful place, if any such place could be found. The nearest approach to it was in that smooth, broad brow and kindly eyes which were now and then lifted up from the foot of the table, out of the mazes of the big book, at the secret of which Christian did not wonder now.

And he had thus listened patiently to this mill-stream, or mill-clack, for three weary years! Perhaps for many another year before — but into that Christian would not allow her lightest thoughts to penetrate,—the sacred veil of Death was over it all.

"If I can only make him happy!" This was already beginning to be her prominent thought, and it warmed her heart that morning at this weary breakfast-table to hear him say,—

"Christian, I don't know how you manage it, but I think I never had such good tea in all my life as since you took it into your own hands and out of Barker's."

"No doubt she makes tea very well," said Miss Gascoigne, condescendingly; "which is one good result of not having been used to a servant to do it for her. And she must have had such excellent practice at Mrs. Ferguson's. I believe those sort of people always feed together—parents, children, apprentices, and all."

"I assure you, not always," said Christian, quietly. "At least I dined with the children alone."

"Indeed! How very pleasant!"

"It was not unpleasant. They were good little things; and, as you know, I always prefer having children about me at meal-times. I think it makes them little gentlemen and gentlewomen in a manner that nothing else will. If I had a house,"—she stopped, and blushed deeply, for having let old things—ah, they seemed so very old and far back now!—make her forget the present. "I mean, I should wish in my house to have the children always accustomed to come to the parents' table as soon as they were old enough to handle a knife and fork."

"Should you?" said Dr. Grey, quite startling her, for she thought he had not been attending to the conversation. "Then we will have Titia and Atty to breakfast with us to-morrow."

Thus, without any fuss, the great revolution was made; so quickly, so completely, that even Miss Gascoigne was dumbfoundered. She set down her tea-cup with a jerk; her handsome face grew red with anger, but still she did not venture a word. She had not lived three years with Dr. Grey without finding out that when the master of the house did choose to exercise

authority, he must be obeyed. He very seldom interfered—especially as regarded the children; like most simple-minded men he was humble about himself, and left a great deal to his womenkind; but when he did interfere it was decisive. Even Miss Gascoigne felt instinctively that she might have wrangled and jangled for an hour, and at the end of it he would have said, almost as gently as he had said it now, "The children will breakfast with us to-morrow."

Christian, too, was surprised; and something more. She had thought her husband so exceedingly quiet, that sometimes her own high spirit winced a little at his passiveness. That is, she knew it would have done, had she been her own natural self, and not in the strange, dreamy, broken-down state which seemed to take interest in nothing. Still she felt some interest in seeing Dr. Grey appear, though but in a trivial thing, rather different from what she had at first supposed him. And when, after an interval of awful silence, during which Miss Gascoigne looked like a brooding hurricane, and Miss Grey frightened out of her life at what was next to happen, he rose and said, "Now, remember, Aunt Henrietta, you or my wife are to give orders to Phillis that the children come to us at lunch-time to-day," Christian was conscious of a slight

throb at heart. It was to see in her husband,—the man to whom, whatever he was, she was tied and bound for life,—that something without which no woman can wholly respect any man,—the power of asserting and of maintaining authority. Not that arbitrary, domineering rule which springs from the blind egotism of personal will, and which every other conscientious will—be it of wife, child, servant, or friend—instinctively resists, and ought to resist; but calm, steadfast, just, righteous authority. There is an old rhyme,—

> "A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut-tree,
> The more ye thrash 'em, the better they be:"

which rhyme is *not* true. But there lies a foundation of truth under it, which is, that no woman ever perfectly loves a man who is not strong enough to make her also obey.

As Dr. Grey went out of the room, and the minute following, as with an after-thought, put in his head again, saying, "Christian, I want you!" she followed him with a lighter heart than she had had for many weary days.

CHAPTER IV.

The little griefs—the petty wounds,
  The stabs of daily care,—
'Crackling of thorns beneath the pot,'
As life's fire burns—now cold, now hot,—
  How hard they are to bear!

But on the fire burns, clear and still;
  The cankering sorrow dies;
The small wounds heal; the clouds are rent,
And through this shattered mortal tent
  Shine down the eternal skies.

"DR. GREY, as to-day is your 'at home,' —at least, as much of an 'at home' as is possible under the circumstances,—I wished to inquire, once for all, what is to be done about the Fergusons?"

"About whom? I beg pardon, Henrietta, but what were you talking about?"

Which, as she had been talking "even on" all breakfast-time, either to or at the little circle, including Letitia and Arthur, was not an unnecessary question.

"I referred to your wife's friends, and late employers, the Fergusons of High Street. As she was married from their house, and as of course they will only be too glad to keep up her acquaintance, they will, doubtless, appear to-day. In that case, much as we should regret it, your sister and myself must decline being present. We cannot possibly admit such people into our society. Isn't it so—eh, Maria?"

Maria, thus sharply appealed to, answered with her usual monosyllable.

Dr. Grey looked at his wife in a puzzled, absent way. He was very absent,—there was no doubt of it,—and sometimes seemed as shut up in himself as if he had lived a bachelor all his life. Besides, he did not readily take in the small wrongs—petty offences—which make half the misery of domestic life, and are equally contemptible in the offender and the offended. There was something pathetically innocent in the way he said,—

"I really do not quite understand. Christian, what does it all mean?"

"It means," said Christian, trying hard to restrain an indignant answer, "that Miss Gascoigne is giving herself a great deal of needless trouble about a thing which will never happen. My friends, the Fergusons, may call to-day—I did

not invite them, though I shall certainly not shut the door upon them—but they have no intention whatever of being on visiting terms at the Lodge, nor have I of asking them."

"I am glad to hear it," said Miss Gascoigne,—"glad to see that you have so much proper feeling, and that all my exertions in bringing you—as I hope to do to-day—for the first time into our society, will not be thrown away."

Christian was not a very proud woman, that is, her pride lay too deep below the surface to be easily ruffled, but she could not bear this.

"If by 'our society' you mean my husband's friends, to whom he is to introduce me, I shall be most happy always to welcome them to his house; but if you imply that I am to exclude my own—honest, worthy, honourable people, uneducated though they may be—I must altogether decline agreeing with you. I will do no such thing."

"What will you do then?" said Miss Gascoigne, after a slight pause; for she did not expect such resistance from the young, pale, passive creature, about whom, for the last few days, she had rather changed her mind, and whom she treated with a patronising consideration. For Aunt Henrietta liked to patronise; it pleased her egotism: besides, she was shrewd enough to see

that an elegant, handsome girl, married to the Master of Saint Bede's, was sure soon to be taken up by somebody—better, perhaps, by her own connexion than by strangers. So—more blandly than might have been expected—she asked, "What will you do?"

"What seems to me—as I think it will to Dr. Grey"—with a timid glance at him, and a wish she had found courage to speak to him first on this matter, "the only right thing I can do. Not to drag my friends into society where they would not feel at home, and which would only look down upon them; but to make them understand clearly that I—and my husband—do not look down upon them, that we respect them, and remember their kindness. We may not ask Mr. Ferguson to dinner, he would find little to say to university dons; and as for his wife,"—she could not forbear a secret smile at the thought of the poor dear woman, with her voluble affectionateness and her gowns of all colours, beside the stately, frigid, perfectly-dressed, and unexceptionably-mannered Miss Gascoigne—"whether or not Mrs. Ferguson is invited to the series of parties that you are planning, I will go and see her, and she shall come to see me, as often as ever I please."

This speech, which began steadily enough,

ended with a shaky voice and flashing eye, which, the moment it met Dr. Grey's gravely watching her, sank immediately.

"That is," she added gently, "if my husband has no objection."

"None," he said—but drew ink and paper to him, and sat down to write a note, which he afterwards handed over to Christian. Then addressing his sister-in-law, "I have invited Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson to dine with us—just ourselves, as you and Maria will be out—at six o'clock to-morrow. And oh!"—with a weary look, as if he were not so insensible to this petty domestic martyrdom as people imagined—"do, Henrietta, let us have a little peace."

It was in vain. Even Dr. Grey's influence could not heal the wounded egotism of this unfortunate lady.

"Peace! Do you mean to say that it is I who make dis-peace? But if you, having known what a good obedient wife really is, can submit to such unwarrantable dictation; and if I, or Maria, your own sister, (Maria, why don't you speak?) cannot offer one word of advice to a young person, who, as might be expected, is entirely ignorant of the usages of society,—is in fact a perfect child—"

"She is my wife!" said Dr. Grey, so suddenly

and decisively that even Christian, who had been reading the note with a grateful heart for kindness shown for her sake, involuntarily started.

My wife. He said only those two words, yet somehow they brought a tear in her eye. The sense of protection, so new and strange, was also pleasant. She could have fought her own battles —at least she could once—without bringing him into them; but when he stood there, with his hand on her shoulder, simply saying those words, which implied, or ought to imply, everything that man is to woman, and everything that woman needs, she became no longer warlike and indignant, but humble, passive, and content.

And long after Dr. Grey was gone away, with his big book under his arm, and Miss Gascoigne, in unutterable wrath and scorn, had turned from her and begun talking volubly to poor Aunt Maria at the fireside, the feeling of content remained.

There was a long pause, during which the two children, Letitia and Arthur, who had listened with open eyes and ears to what was passing among their elders, now, forgetting it all, crept away for their usual half-hour of after-breakfast play in the oriel window of the dining-room.

Christian also took her work, and began thinking of other things. She neither wished to

fight nor be fought for, particularly in such a petty domestic war. One of the advantages among the many disadvantages of a girlhood almost entirely removed from the society of women, was that it had saved her from women's smallnesses. Besides, her nature itself was large, like her person; large, and bounteous, and sweet; it refused to take in those petty motives which disturb petty minds. Life to her was a grand romantic drama—perhaps, alas! a tragedy; but it never could be made into a genteel comedy, with childish intrigues, Liliputian battles, tempests in teapots, or thunders made upon kettle-drums.

Thus, concluding the temporary storm was over, and almost forgetting it at the half-hour's end, she called cheerfully to the children to get ready for a walk with her this sunshiny morning.

Miss Gascoigne rose, her black eyes flashing: "Children, you will not leave the house. You will walk with nobody but your own proper nurse. It was your poor mamma's custom, and though she is dead, her wishes shall be carried out,—at least so long as I am alive."

Christian stood utterly amazed. Her intention had been so harmless; she had thought the walk good for the children, and perhaps good for herself to have their company. She had

meant to take them out with her the first available day, and begin a regular series of rambles, which perhaps might win their little hearts towards her, for they still kept aloof and shy; and now all her pleasant plans were set aside.

And there the children stood, half frightened, half amused, watching the conflict of authority between their elders. One thing was clear, there must be no bringing them into the contest. Christian saw that, and with a strong effort of self-control she said to Miss Gascoigne,—

"I think, before we discuss this matter, the children had better leave the room. Go, Atty and Titia; your aunts and I will send word to the nursery by-and-by."

The children went obediently, though Christian heard Arthur whisper to his sister something about "such a jolly row." But there was none.

Miss Gascoigne burst forth into a perfect torrent of words, directed not to Mrs. Grey, but at her, involving such insinuations, such accusations, that Christian, who had never been used to this kind of thing, stood literally astounded.

She answered not a word; she could not trust herself to speak. She had meant so kindly; was so innocent of any feeling save a wish to be good and motherly to these motherless children. Besides, she had such an intense craving for their affec-

tion, and even their companionship, for there were times when her life felt withering up within her; chilled to death by the gloom of the dull home, with its daily round of solemn formalities. If she had spoken, she would have burst into tears. To save herself from this, she rose and left the parlour.

It might have been weak, unworthy a woman of spirit; but Christian was, in one sense—not Miss Gascoigne's—still a very child. And most child-like, in their passionate bitterness, their keen sense of injustice, were the tears she shed in her own room, alone. For she did not go to Dr. Grey; why should she? Her complaints could only wound him. And somehow she scorned to complain. She had not been a governess for two years without learning that authority propped up by extraneous power is nearly useless, and that between near connexions love commanded, not won, generally results in something very like hatred.

Besides, was there not some truth in what the aunt said? Had she—the second wife—authority over the first Mrs. Grey's children? Would it not be better to let them alone, for good or for evil, and trouble herself about their welfare no more? But, just that minute, Oliver's little feet went pattering outside the door. Oliver, who, still a nursery pet, was freer than the others, and who

had already learnt where to come, of forenoons, for biscuits to eat, or toys to be mended. There was now a one-wheeled cart and a three-legged horse requiring Christian's tenderest attention; and as she sat down on the crimson sofa, and busied herself over them, with the little eager face creeping close to hers, and the little fat arm steadying itself round her neck, her wet eyes soon grew dry and bright, and her heart less sore, less hopeless. The small necessities of the present, which make children's company so soothing, quieted her now; and by the time she had watched the little fellow run away, dragging his cart and horse down the oak floor, shouting "Gee-ho!" and turning round often to laugh at her, Christian felt that life looked less blank and dreary than it had done an hour ago.

Still, when she had dressed herself in the violet silk and Honiton lace which Miss Gaskoigne had informed her were necessary—oh, how she had been tormented about the etiquette of this "at home!"—the cloud darkened over her again. What should she do or say to these strange people?—the worse that they were not quite strangers—that she knew them by report or by sight—and, alack! from her father's ill name, they knew her only too well. How they would talk her over and criticize her, in that small

way in which women do criticize one another, and which she now, for the first time in her life, had experienced. Was it the habit of all university ladies? If so, how should she endure a whole lifetime of that trivial ceremoniousness in outside things, those small backbitings and fault-findings, such as the two aunts indulged in? It was worse, far worse, than poor Mrs. Ferguson's stream of foolish maternalities,—vulgar, but warm and kindly, and never ill-natured. And, oh! ten times worse than anything Christian had known in her girlhood,—which had been forlorn indeed, but free; when she had followed through necessity her nomadic father, who had at any rate left her alone, to form her own mind and character, as she best could. Of man's selfishness and badness she knew enough; but of women's small sillinesses, narrow formalities, and petty unkindnesses she was utterly ignorant till now.

"How shall I bear them? Let Dr. Grey be ever so good to me; still, how shall I bear them?" She sighed, she almost sobbed, and pressed her cheek wearily against the frosty pane, for she was sitting in a window-seat on the staircase, lingering till the last possible instant before the hour when Miss Gascoigne had said she ought to be in her place in the drawing-room.

"My dear, are you not afraid of catching cold?" said the hesitating voice of Miss Grey. "Besides, will not the servants think it rather odd, your sitting here on the staircase? Bless me, my dear, were you crying?"

"No," answered Christian energetically, "No!" and then belied her truthfulness by bursting immediately into tears.

Miss Grey was melted at once. "There now, my dear, take my smelling-bottle; you will be better soon; it is only a little over-excitement. But, indeed, you need not mind; our friends—that is, Henrietta's—for you know I seldom visit—are all very nice people; and they will pay every respect to my brother's wife. Do not be frightened at them."

"I was not frightened," replied Mrs. Grey, more inclined to smile than to be offended at this earnest condolence. "What troubled me was quite another thing."

"Henrietta, perhaps?" with an uneasy glance up the staircase. "But, my dear, you must not mind Henrietta; she means well. You don't know how busy she has been all the morning, arranging everything. 'For,' says she to me, 'since your brother has married again, we must make the best of it, and introduce his wife into society, and be very kind to her.' And I am sure I hope we are."

"Thank you," said Christian, somewhat haughtily, till touched by the mild deprecation of that foolish, gentle face, so gentle as half to atone for its foolishness.

"You see, my dear, your marriage was much worse to her than to me, because Mrs. Grey was her own sister; while Arnold is my brother. And all I want in the wide world is to see my brother happy. I hope it isn't wrong of me, but I don't think quite as dear Henrietta does. I always felt that dear Arnold might marry anybody he pleased; and I should be sure to love her, if only she made him happy. But, hush! I hear somebody coming."

And the poor little lady composed herself into some pretence of indifference, when Christian rose from the window-sill, and stood like a queen,—or rather like what she tried to say to herself so as to keep up her matronly dignity, whenever passionate, girlish grief or anger threatened to break it down,—"like Dr. Grey's wife."

Miss Gascoigne stopped benignly, much to Christian's surprise, for she did not guess what a wonderful influence clothes have in calming down ill-tempers. And Miss Gascoigne was beautifully dressed; quite perfect from top to toe; and she was such a handsome woman still, that it was quite a pleasure to look at her, as she very well knew. She had come direct from

her mirror, and was complacent accordingly. Also, she felt that domestic decorum must be preserved on the "at home" day.

"That is a very pretty dress you have on: I suppose Dr. Grey bought it in London?"

"Yes."

"Did he choose it likewise?"

"I believe so."

"My sister always chose her own dresses; but then she paid for them too. She had a little income of her own, which is a very good thing for a wife to have."

"A very good thing."

"Indeed, Mrs. Grey, I scarcely expected *you* to think so."

"I think," said Christian firmly, though for the moment the silk gown seemed to burn her arms, and the pearl brooch and lace collar to weigh like lead on her bosom. "I think that in any true marriage it does not signify one jot whether the husband or the wife has the money. Shall we go downstairs?"

There was time for the hot cheek to cool, and the angry heart to be stilled a little, before the visitors came.

Miss Gascoigne had truly remarked that the Master's wife was "unaccustomed to society;" that society which forms the staple of all provin-

cial towns, well dressed, well mannered, well informed. But it seemed to Christian as if these ladies, though thoroughly ladylike in manner, which was very grateful to her innate sense of refinement, all dressed after one fashion, and talked mostly about the same things. To her, ungifted with the blessed faculty of small talk, the conversation appeared somewhat frivolous, unreal, and uninteresting. She hardly knew what to say or how to say it; yet was painfully conscious that her every word and every look were being sharply criticized, either in the character of Edward Oakley's daughter or Dr. Grey's wife.

"At least, he shall not be ashamed of me," was the thought that kept her up through both weariness and resentment, and she found herself involuntarily looking towards the door every time it opened. Would he come in? At least his presence would bring her that sense of relief and protection which she had never failed to feel from the first hour she knew Dr. Arnold Grey.

He did come in, though not immediately, and passing her with a smile, which doubtless furnished the text for a whole week's gossip in Avonsbridge, went over to talk to a group of ladies belonging to Saint Bede's.

And now for the first time Christian saw what her husband was "in society."

Next to a bad man, or a fool, of all things most detestable is "a man of society;" a brilliant, showy person, who gathers round him a knot of listeners, to whom his one object is to exhibit himself. But it is no small advantage for a man, even a clever or learned man, to feel and appear at home in any company; to be neither eccentric, nor proud, nor shy; to have a pleasant word or smile for everybody; both to seem and to be occupied with other people instead of with himself, and with what other people are thinking about him. In short, a frank, kindly, natural gentleman; so sure both of his position and himself, that he takes no trouble in the assertion of either, but simply devotes himself to making all about him as comfortable and happy as he can. And this was Dr. Arnold Grey.

He talked little, and not brilliantly, but he knew how to make other people talk. By some subtle, fine essence in his own nature, he seemed to extract the best aroma from every other; and better than most conversation was it to look at his kindly, earnest, listening face. As, in the pauses of politeness, Christian did look, more than once; and a thrill shot through her, the consciousness, dear to every woman, of being proud of her

husband. Ay, whether she loved him or not, she was certainly proud of him.

In all good hearts, love's root is in goodness. Deeper than even love itself is that ideal sense of being satisfied,—satisfied in all one's moral nature, in the cravings of one's soul after what seems nearest perfection. And though in many cases poor human hearts are so weak, or strong—which is it?—that we cling to imperfectness, and love it simply because we love it, with a sort of passionate pity, ever hoping to have its longings realized; still this kind of love is not *the* love, which exalts, strengthens, glorifies. Sooner or later it must die the death. It had no root, and it withers away; whereas, let there be a root, and ever such a small budding of leaves, sometimes merciful nature makes it grow.

Christian looked at her husband many times, stealthily, whenever he did not notice her. She liked to look at him. She liked to judge his face, not with the expression it wore towards herself; *that* she knew well,—alas! too well; but as it was when turned towards other people, interested in them and in the ordinary duties of life, which sometimes, when absorbed in a passionate love, a man lets slip for the time. Now she saw him as he was in reality, the head of his family, the Master of his College, the centre of a circle of

friends; doing his work in the world as a man ought to do it, and as a woman dearly loves to see him do it. Christian's eye brightened, and a faint warmth seemed creeping into her dull, deadened heart.

While she was thinking thus, and wondering if it were real, her heart suddenly stopped still.

It was only at the sound of a name repeated in idle conversation by two ladies behind her.

"Edwin Uniacke! Yes, it is quite true. My husband was speaking of it only this morning. He is Sir Edwin Uniacke now, with a large fortune besides."

"He didn't deserve it. If ever there was an utter scapegrace it was he. He broke his poor mother's heart; she died during that affair. The Dean must have known all about it?"

"Yes, but he and the Master kept it very much to themselves. My husband hates talking; and as for Dr. Grey ——"

"The Dean paid me a long visit this morning, Mrs. Brereton," suddenly interrupted Dr. Grey. "We were congratulating ourselves on our prospects. We think there are one or two men who will do Saint Bede's great credit next year."

"That is well. But my husband says it will be long before we get a man like one whom I was just speaking of—Mr. Uniacke—Sir Edwin he is

now. He has succeeded to the baronetcy. Of course you have heard of this?"

"I have," briefly answered Dr. Grey.

And the Dean's wife—who had all the love of talking which the Dean had not, mingled with a little nettled sense of balked curiosity—then turned to Mrs. Grey.

"You must have heard of that young man, and the scandal about him; it was only a year ago that he was rusticated. Such a pity! He was a most clever fellow—good at everything. And quite a genius for music. To hear him sing and play was delightful! And yet he was such a scamp—a downright villain."

"My dear Mrs. Brereton," said Dr. Grey, "nobody is quite a villain at twenty. And if he were, don't you think that the less we talk about villains the better?"

So the conversation dropped. Dropped as things do drop every day, under the smooth surface of society, which handles so lightly edged tools, and treads so gaily upon bomb-shells, with the fusee just taken out in time.

"I am very tired," said Mrs. Grey, while Dr. Grey was seeing the last of the visitors to their carriage. "I think I will go at once to my own room."

"Do so," replied Aunt Maria. "Indeed it

has been a very fatiguing day for you and for us all. Go, and I will tell Arnold you are dressing. It only wants half-an-hour to dinner."

"I will be ready."

And so she was. But for twenty out of the thirty minutes she had lain motionless on her bed, almost like a dead figure, as passive and as white. Then she rose, dressed herself, and went down to the formal meal, and to the sombre, safe routine of her present existence; as it would flow on—and she prayed with all her heart it might—until she died.

CHAPTER V.

He stands a-sudden at the door,
  And no one hears his soundless tread,
  And no one sees his veilèd head,
Or silent hand, put forth so sure,

To grasp and snatch from mortal sight;
  Or else benignly turn away,
  And let us live our little day,
And tremble back into the light:

But though thus awful to our eyes
He is an Angel in disguise.

EVERY human being, and certainly every woman, has among the various ideals of happiness, good to make, if never to enjoy, one special ideal—that great necessity of every tender heart,—Home.

Christian had made hers, built her castle in Spain, and furnished and adorned it from basement to battlement, even when she was a girl of fourteen. Sitting night after night alone, listening for the father's footstep, and then trembling when she heard it; or hidden away up in

her own bed-room, her sole refuge from the orgies that took place below, where the sound of music, exquisite music, went up like the cry of an angel imprisoned in a den of brutes,—the girl had imagined it all. And through every vicissitude, hidden closer for its utter contrast to all the associations and experience of her daily life, Christian Oakley had kept in her heart its innocent, womanly ideal of home.

Now she had the reality. And what was it?

Externally it looked very bright. Peeping into that warm, crimson-tinted dining-room at the hour between dinner and tea, when the whole family at the Lodge were sure to be assembled there, anybody would say what a happy family it was, and what a pleasant picture it made. Father and mother at either end of the table; children on both sides of it, and the two elderly aunts seated comfortably in their two armchairs at the fire-side, one knitting, *q. e. d.* sleeping, the other——

No. Miss Gascoigne never slept. Her sharp,

"Flaw-seeking eyes, like needle's points,"

were always open, and more especially when the circle consisted, as now, of her brother-in-law, his children, and his new wife. Doubtless she considered watchfulness her duty. Indeed, as she explained over and over again to Aunt Maria,

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the principal reason which made her consent still to remain at the Lodge, instead of returning to her own pretty cottage at Avonside, was to overlook and guard the interests of "those poor, motherless children."

Now it happened, unfortunately for Miss Gascoigne, that if Christian had one bright spot in the future of her married life, to which she had looked forward, earnestly, longingly, it was those children; how she would take care of them, fill up her weary days with them; love them and be loved by them; in short, find in them the full satisfaction of her motherly heart—that heart in which she then thought there were no instincts or emotions left except the motherly. How she yearned and craved for this, God and her own soul only knew.

Yet, how she hardly knew, but so it was, none of these hopes had been fulfilled. She saw almost nothing of the children, save during the one hour after dinner, when she sat silently watching them,—one on each side of their father, and one on his knee; all so happy together; Dr. Grey always looked happy when he was with his little folk. And they, their very faults faded off into sweetnesses when they came within the atmosphere of that good, loving, fatherly nature, for love makes love, and goodness creates good-

ness. Titia lost her prim conceit; Atty his selfish roughness, and Oliver became a perfect little angel of a child, for at least one hour a-day,—the hour they spent with their father.

It was a pretty picture. Christian, sitting apart, with the gulf of shining mahogany between, bridged it often with her wistful eyes, but she never said a word.

She was not jealous, not in the slightest degree; for hers was the large nature which, deeply recognising others' rights, and satisfied with its own, is incapable of any of the lower forms of jealousy; but she was sad. The luxurious aimlessness of her present life was a little heavy to the once poor, active, hard-working young governess who had never known an idle, or even a restful hour. The rest was sweet,—oh, how sweet! but the idleness was difficult to bear. She had tried sometimes in the long mornings, when the Master was shut up in his study, to get the children with her, and teach them a little. But Miss Gascoigne had replied that "my late sister" did not approve of any but paid governesses; and that it was impossible the wife of the Master of St. Bede's could go "trapesing about like a nursemaid," taking walks with the children. Their own mamma never thought of doing such a thing.

And this reference to her predecessor, given

about twenty times a day, always effectually silenced Christian. Though it did not silence,—it could not—the cry of her heart to be of some use to somebody, to have some young, fresh, happy creatures to love and be loved by, even though they were another woman's children.

So she sat this evening, and many evenings, quiet but sad-eyed; and it was a relief when Barker entered with the tea-tray, and three or four letters for Mrs. Grey.

"How very odd! Who can be writing to me? I know nobody!"

At which simple speech Miss Gascoigne looked daggers, and the minute Barker was gone spoke them too.

"I must beg you, Mrs. Grey, if only for our sakes, to be a little more circumspect. How could you let out before Barker that you 'knew nobody?'"

"It is the truth,—why should I not say it?" was all Christian answered, as she opened her letters, almost the first which had come to her still unfamiliar name. "They are all invitations. O dear! what shall I do?"

Dr. Grey looked up at the exclamation; he never seemed to hear much of what passed around him, except when his wife spoke, and then some slight movement often showed that though a silent he was not an unobservant man.

"Invitations!" cried Miss Gascoigne, "the very thing I was expecting. And to the best houses in Avonsbridge, too... This is the result of your At home. I feel quite pleased at having so successfully introduced you into good society."

"Thank you," said Christian, half-amused, half—well, it was not worth while being annoyed at such a small thing. She only looked across at her husband to see how he felt on the matter.

"I think," said the Master, with a comical twinkle in his eye, "that no society is half so good or so pleasant as our own."

Christian looked puzzled a minute, but afterwards smiled gratefully.

"We may decline then?"

"Should you like it best?"

"I should, indeed." For, somehow, though she did not shrink from her new life,—that strange, perplexing life for which her sense of duty was making her every day more strong,—she did shrink from the outward shows of it. To be stared at by cold, sharp Avonsbridge eyes, or pointed at as "the governess" whom Dr. Grey had married; worse, perhaps, as Edward Oakley's daughter, the Edward Oakley whose failings everybody knew,—"Yes," she added quickly, "I would very much rather decline."

"Decline! when I have taken so much trouble,

bought a new dress expressly for these parties. They are bridal parties, Mrs. Grey, given for you, meant to welcome you into society. Society always does it, except when the marriage is one to be ashamed of."

Christian started; the hot flush which now twenty times a day was beginning to burn in her once pale cheek, burnt there now; but she restrained herself, for the children sat there,—Letitia, preternaturally sharp, and noticing everything; Arthur, who rarely spoke, except to say something rude. And also the children's father.

Christian sought his eyes; she was convinced he had heard and understood every word. But still it had not affected him, except to a wistful watchfulness of herself, so tender that her indignation sank down.

"Shall I wait till to-morrow before I write? Perhaps, Dr. Grey, after all it would be as well for us to accept these invitations?"

"Perhaps," said he; and said no more. There was no need. Whether or not they loved, without doubt the husband and wife perfectly understood one another. So next morning, after a brief consultation with Dr. Grey, Christian sat down and wrote to those grand University ladies, who, though not an atom better than herself, would, she knew well,—and smiled, half amused at the

knowledge,—a year ago have scarcely recognised her existence,—that Mrs. Grey "accepted with pleasure" their kind invitations.

When the day came round, she dressed herself, for the first time in her whole life, in proper evening costume,—white silk, white lace, ornaments and flowers. Not too youthful a toilette, for she had no wish to appear young now, but still bridal; a "bride adorned with her jewels;" only these were but few. She was fastening her one opal brooch, and looking into the mirror, half sad, half wondering to see herself so fair, when Dr. Grey entered.

He had a jeweller's case in his hand. Awkwardly, even nervously, he fastened a cross round her neck, and put a bracelet on her arm. Both were simple enough, but, little as she knew about such things, Christian could see they were made of very magnificent diamonds.

"Do you like them? They are for you."

"You have not bought them on purpose?"

"Oh, no, that extravagance was quite beyond me; but I had them re-set. They belonged to my mother, and have never been worn till now. Will my wife wear them?"

Christian drooped her head. Great tears were gathering under her eye-lids.

"I am so foolish,—so very foolish. And you are so good to me, so unfailingly, unceasingly good. I try to be good, too; I do indeed. Don't be angry with me."

"Angry?—my darling!"

People may write sentiment by the page, or talk it by the hour, but there is something in real love which will neither be discussed nor described. Let us draw over it the holy veil of silence: these things ought to belong to two alone.

Dr. Grey's wife knew how he loved her. And when he quitted her to order the carriage which was to take them to their grand dinner-party, she stood, all in her fine garments, a fair, white, bridal-like vision,—stood and wept.

It is a law most absolute and inevitable, that love, however great, however small, never remains quite stationary; it must either diminish or increase. When Christian awoke out of the stunned condition which had been hers both before and after her marriage, she began to awake also to the dawning consciousness of what real marriage ought to be, the perfect, sacred union, so seldom realised or even sought for, and yet none the less the right aim and just desire of every true man and woman, which, when not attained, makes the

life imperfect, and the marriage, if not a sin, a terrible mistake.

"I have sinned!—I have sinned!" was the perpetual cry of Christian's heart, which she had thought was dead as a stone, and now discovered to be a living, throbbing, woman's heart, which needed its lord, was ready to obey him, love and serve him,—nay, fall down in the very dust before him, if only he could be found! And she knew now,—knew by the agony of regret for all she had missed—that he never had been found, that the slain love over which she had mourned had been a mere fancy, not a vital human love at all.

Now, her husband never kissed her that she would not have given worlds to feel that his were the only lover's lips which had ever touched hers; he never called her by one tender name that she did not shiver to think she had ever heard it from any other man. There was coming into her that sense of sacred self-appropriation, that fierce revulsion from any intrusion on the same, which comes into any woman's nature when beginning to love as she is beloved. Christian did not as yet; but she recognised her husband's love, and it penetrated with a strong sweetness to her inmost soul. Mingled with it was an acute pain, a profound regret, a sad humility. Not hers, alas! the joyful pride, the full content, of a heart which is conscious in

its sweetest depths that it gives as much as it receives.

This was all. She had done nothing wrong, nothing unworthy of either herself or Dr. Grey. Nothing but what hundreds of women do every day, and neither blame themselves, nor are blamed by others. She had but suffered a new footstep to enter her young life's garden, without having had the courage to say of one little corner in it, "Do not tread there, it is a grave." Only a grave; a very harmless grave now, tricked with innocent, girlish flowers, but still containing the merest handful of dust. It would never corrupt, and might even serve to fertilise that simple heart, which, out of its very simplicity, had made for itself a passing idol out of what was essentially false and base, which would have shortly crumbled to pieces out of its own baseness, had not Fate—or Providence—with kindly cruel hand for ever thrown it down. Still, this was a grave, and her husband did not know it was there.

Nobody ever had known. The day of delusion had been so short, and the only relics left of it were those four letters, burnt by herself on her marriage morning. The whole story, occupying in all only four weeks, had gone by exactly like a dream, and she had awakened,—awakened to find out what love really was, or what it might have been.

She wept, not loudly, but quietly, till she dared not weep any more. A sudden thought made her struggle at once for composure, and try to efface every external trace of tears.

"I am Dr. Grey's wife," she said to herself, and resolved that the grand University magnates should find out nothing in her unworthy of that name,—nothing that could make people say, even the most ill-natured of them,—and, alas! she had lately come to learn that the world is filled, not as she thought, with only bad and good, but with an intermediate race, which is merely ill-natured,—say, with a sneer, that Dr. Grey's second marriage had been "a mistake."

Never before had Christian thought much of these outside things; but she did now, at least she tried her best. There was not a lock unsmoothed in her fair hair, not a fold awry in her silks or laces, and not a trace of agitation visible in her manner or countenance, when Mrs. Grey opened her door to descend the stairs.

She was considering whether it would not be courteous to knock at Miss Gascoigne's door, and ask if she too was ready, when she heard a loud outcry in the nursery above. This, alas! was no novelty. More than once Christian had rushed wildly upstairs expecting some dreadful catastrophe, but it was only the usual warfare between

Phillis and the children, especially Arthur, who was no longer a baby to be petted and scolded, or a little girl to be cowed into obedience, but a big boy to be ruled, if at all, *vi et armis*—as, Mrs. Grey had more than once suspected, Phillis did rule.

"I won't! I won't! and you shan't make me!" was the fierce scream which caught her ear before she entered the nursery door.

There stood Phillis, her face red with passion, grasping Arthur with one hand, and beating him with the other, while the boy, holding on to her with the tenacity of a young bull-dog, was, with all the might of his little fists, returning blow for blow. In short, a regular stand-up fight, in which the two faces, elder and younger, woman and child, were alike in obstinacy and fury. No wonder at Titia's sullenness or Atty's storms of rage. The children only learned what they were taught.

"Phillis, what is the matter? What has the boy done amiss?"

Phillis turned round with the defiant look which she assumed every time Mrs. Grey entered the nursery, only a little harder, a little fiercer, with the black brows bent, and the under-hung mouth almost savage in its expression.

"What has he done, ma'am? He has dis-

obeyed me. I'll teach you to do it again, you little villain you!"

"Phillis!"

Never before had Phillis's new mistress addressed her in that tone; it made her pause a second, and then her blows fell with redoubled strength on the shrinking shoulders, even on the head, of the frantic, furious boy.

Now there was one thing which in all her life Christian never could stand, and that was, to see a child beaten, or in any way ill-used. The tyranny which calls itself authority, the personal revenge which hides under the name of punishment, and both used, cowardly, by the stronger against the weaker, were, to her keen sense of justice, so obnoxious, so detestable, that they always roused in her a something which is at the root of all the righteous rebellions in the world—a something which God, who ordained righteous authority, implants in every honest human heart as a safeguard against authority unrighteous, and therefore authority no longer. If Christian had been a mother, and seen the father of her own children beating one of them in the way Phillis beat Arthur, it would have made her, as she was wont to say, with a curious flash of her usually quiet eyes, "dangerous."

She wasted no words; it was not her

habit. She merely, with her firm, strong hand, wrenched the victim out of the oppressor's grasp.

"Arthur, go to my room. I will hear what you have done amiss. Phillis, remember, henceforward no children in my house shall be struck or punished except by their father or myself."

Clear and determined rang out the mistress's voice—mother and mistress—in this, her first assertion of both her rights. Phillis drew back astonished, and then, recovering herself, darted after the retreating boy. But it was too late, he had already gained the staircase. It was steep, dark, twisted, very unsafe for children, still, in his fear, Arthur plunged down it. In a minute there was heard a cry and a heavy fall.

Fierce-tempered woman as she was, Phillis had a heart. She rushed down after the child, but he turned screaming from her, and it was his stepmother who lifted him up and carried him into her own room.

Christian, young as she was, had had necessarily much experience with children. She soothed the boy, and felt that no limbs were broken; indeed, he complained of nothing, but he turned whiter and whiter, and shrank from the slightest touch.

"Something is certainly wrong with him. We

must send for the doctor. Whom do you have ordinarily?"

The question was put to Phillis, who, her fury all gone, stood behind the sofa, almost as pale as the poor child. She answered humbly, and named Dr. Anstruther, whom Christian well knew by report; an old man, who for forty years had been the depository of the sicknesses and the sorrows of half Avonsbridge.

"Go then, tell your master I think Barker ought to be sent for him at once; and say to Dr. Grey,—only don't frighten him, for it may be a mere trifle after all,—that I am afraid he will have to dine out without me to-day. Go quick, Phillis. There is no time to lose."

For the little face was sinking back paler and paler, and there was an occasional faint moan.

Almost for the first time since her entrance into the Grey family, Phillis, against her will, actually obeyed orders, and slipped away; so hastily that she stumbled over Letitia, and gave her a good box on the ear; however, the little girl did not cry, but gathered herself up, as if quite used to such treatment, and crept over to the sofa.

"Will Atty die, do you think?" she whispered in much curiosity,—only curiosity; there was not a tear in her eyes. "Because then he would never thump me any more."

Christian's very soul recoiled, and then melted

into the deepest pity. What sort of bringing up could it have been which had resulted in feelings like these?

She took no notice of what was said, but merely desired the little girl to bring pillows and a footstool, so that she could hold Arthur as easily as possible till the doctor came. And then she bade her take off the diamond bracelets and the hanging lace, and told her where to put all this finery away; which Letitia accomplished with aptitude and neatness.

"There, that will do. Thank you, my dear. You are a tidy little girl. Will you come and give me a kiss?"

Letitia obeyed, though with some hesitation, and then came and stood by her stepmother, watching her intently. At last she said,—

"You are crumpling your pretty white silk dress. Won't that vex you very much?

"Not very much—if it cannot be helped."

"That is odd! I thought you liked fine clothes, and married papa that he might give you them. Phillis said so."

"Phillis was mistaken."

More than that Christian did not answer; indeed, she hardly took in what the child said, being fully engrossed with her charge.

Letitia spoke again.

"Are you really sorry for Atty? Aunt Henrietta said you did not care for any of us."

"Not care for any of you!" And almost as if it were a real mother's heart, Christian felt hers yearn over the poor pale face, growing every minute more ghastly.

"I wonder where papa can be! Letitia, go and look for him. Tell him to send Barker for the doctor at once."

And then she gave her whole attention to 'Arthur, forgetting everything except that she had taken upon herself towards these children all the duties and anxieties of motherhood. How many—perhaps none—would she ever win of its joys? But to women like her duty alone constitutes happiness.

She felt happier than she had done for very, very long, when at last Arthur lay soothed and quieted in her arms, which clasped round him close and warm, as finding in him something to comfort, something to love. She had almost lost sight of danger and fear, when the door opened and Phillis entered, Dr. Grey following.

On Christian's first look at the latter, she found out one thing—which hardly so much lessened her reverence as converted it into a strange tenderness—that her husband was one of the many men who, brave enough morally, are the most utter cowards at sight of physical suffering. Completely unhinged, trembling all over, Dr. Grey knelt by his boy's side.

"What must we do, Christian? What must we do?"

She knew at once that whatever was done she must do it; but before she had time to say a word, there appeared Miss Gascoigne.

"What is wrong? Why is the doctor sent for? That child hurt? Nonsense! Hurt seriously with just a mere slip down a few stairs! I will never believe it. It is just making a fuss about nothing. Dr. Grey, we must go to the dinner-party, or what would people say? Phillis, take Arthur from Mrs. Grey and carry him up to the nursery."

But Arthur screamed, and clung with all his might to his stepmother's neck.

"He is hurt," said Christian firmly, "and I cannot have him moved. Hush, Atty! you grieve papa. Be quiet, and nobody shall touch you but papa and me."

Miss Gascoigne stood mute,—then again ordered Phillis to take the child.

"I won't go! She will beat me again. Please, please;" and he clung again to his step-mother. "I'll be good—I'll be so good, if you will only take care of me."

"I will," said Christian. And the desperate instinct of protection, which some women have towards all helpless things, gleamed in her eyes has she added, "Miss Gascoigne, you must leave

this child to me. I know what to do with him. Shall it be so, Dr. Grey?"

"Certainly."

With one furious glance at her brother-in-law, Miss Gascoigne turned and walked out of the room.

But there was no time to heed her, for that instant, bubbling over the boy's white lips, Christian saw a red drop or two; they made her own heart stand still.

It had so happened that during her stay with the Fergusons one of the little boys had broken his collar-bone; a slight accident in itself, had not the bone pierced the lung, causing a long and severe illness. Quick as lightning Christian recollected all that had not been done, and all that the doctor said they ought to have done, in the case of little Jamie. It was useless speaking out what she feared; indeed, one look at Dr. Grey's terrified face showed her it was impossible; so she merely laid Arthur down very gently from her arms, persuaded him to let her place him on his back along the sofa, and wiped the few drops from his mouth.

"Do not be frightened, papa,"—and she made an effort at a smile—"as I said, I think I know what is amiss with him. I am used to children. The doctor will be here soon. Suppose you were to go downstairs and see if he is coming."

Dr. Grey obeyed mechanically. When he came back he found Letitia and the nurse sent away. Christian hardly knew how she managed it, but she did do it, for it was necessary; Arthur must be kept quiet. She was now sitting in the silent, half-dark room, with the boy lying, quite still and patient now; his little hot hand clinging fast to hers.

"How content he seems with you! He does not want Phillis, I think."

"No! no! no!" cried Arthur violently. "Phillis beat me; she always does, every day of my life. I hate her! If I die, Phillis ought to be hanged, for it was she that killed me."

"Hush! hush! no speaking," said Christian, and her soft compelling hand pressed the boy down again. She was now almost certain that the lung was injured, and her eyes were full of foreboding compassion as they rested on the poor little fellow, so unused to suffering.

"Is this all true about Phillis?" whispered Dr. Grey.

"I fear it is; but we cannot talk of that just now. Ah, here is the doctor!"

It was an inexpressible relief to Christian, when, after his first glance at the patient, Dr. Anstruther said in his quick, firm, cheery way,—

"Now, Dr. Grey, we'll soon put your little man right. But we only want women here. The best thing you can do is to walk out of the room. This young lady?"

"Mrs. Grey—Dr. Anstruther."

"I see—I beg your pardon, Madam." And his keen eyes took in at a glance the graceful figure—the brilliant evening dress. "I was to have met you to-day at dinner at the Vice-Chancellor's, but this prevented you, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Christian; and then in a few whispered words, told about the accident, and her suspicions of what it was. The free-masonry of trust which springs up instantaneously between any honest doctor and sensible nurse made them friends in five minutes.

Mrs. Grey's fears had been only, too true. Many weeks of illness and of anxious nursing lay before her and her poor boy. After all had been done that could be done, Dr. Grey was recalled, and the facts explained to him; though Dr. Anstruther, who seemed to understand him well, dwelt as lightly upon them as possible, consistent with that strict truth which was always spoken by the good doctor. Still, it was enough.

When Dr. Anstruther was gone, Dr. Grey came and stood by the sofa, in great distress.

"An illness of weeks,—delicate for months,—and perhaps weakly for life. Oh, my poor boy!"

"Hush!" said Christian, "the child might hear. Go, and sit down for a minute, and I will come to you."

She came, and, leaning over him, laid her hand tenderly on her husband's shoulder. She could do no more, even though he was her husband. She felt helpless to comfort him, for the key which unlocks all consolation was in her heart not yet found. Only there came over her, with a solemn presentiment which had its sweetness still, the conviction that whatever happiness her lot might have missed, its duties were very plain, very sure. All her life she would have, more or less, to take care of, not only these her children, but their father.

She stood beside him, holding his shaking hands between her two firm ones, till she heard Arthur call, faintly.

"I must leave you now. You will go to bed; and oh, do try to sleep. Poor papa!"

"And you?"

"I shall sit up, of course. Never mind me: I have done it many a time."

"Will you have nobody with you?"

"No. It would disturb Arthur. Hush! there is no time for speaking. This once you must let me have my way. Good night, papa."

But for all that, in the dead of the night, she heard the study-door open, and saw Dr. Grey

come stealing in to where she sat watching,—as she was to watch for many a weary day and night,—beside his boy's pillow. He saw her likewise—a figure the like of which, husband and father as he had been, he had never seen before. No household experience of his had ever yet shown him a woman in that light,—the dearest light in which any man can behold her.

A figure, quite different from the stately lady in white splendours of six hours before, sitting, dressed in a sober, soundless, dark-coloured gown; motionless, by the dim lamp-light; but with the soft eyes open and watchful, and the tender hands ever ready for those endless wants of sickness at night—especially sickness that may be tending unto death, or unto the awful struggle between life and death, which most women have at some time of their lives to keep ward over, till danger has gone by. Just the sort of figure, in short, that every man is sure to need beside him, once or more, in his journey between the cradle and the grave. Happy he over whose cradle it has bent, and who, nearing the grave, shall have such a one upon whose bosom he may close his weary eyes.

When Christian saw her husband, she stirred, and put up a finger for silence. Dr. Grey crossed the room, trying hard to make his step light and

noiseless, but piteously failing in the attempt. Still Arthur was not disturbed.

"He sleeps sound, Christian. Does he suffer very much, do you think?"

"Not now."

"Will he ever recover?"

"I hope so. Oh, please God, I trust so! Dr. Anstruther said there was no reason why he should not."

"And you—you think so too?" with a touching appeal.

"Yes, I do think so."

Dr. Grey seemed relieved. In a kind of helpless, childlike way, he stood behind her and watched all she did for the child, who waked thirsty, and cried, and moaned; but by-and-by was soothed to sleep again.

His father shuddered as he gazed upon him.

"He looks as if he were dead—my poor boy!"

"You must not look at him. You must go to bed," said Christian, with a gentle authority.

"Presently. And you?—are you not afraid to sit up here alone?"

"Oh, no!"

"You never seem to be afraid of anything."

"Not of much; I have gone through such a deal," said Christian, with a faint smile. "But, papa, indeed you must go to bed."

Nevertheless, they stood a little longer looking down upon Arthur, whose breathing grew softer into natural sleep. Then, with a mutual impulse given by the unity of a common grief, the husband and wife turned and kissed one another.

"God bless you, my darling, my poor children's mother, the first they ever ——"

He stopped, and never finished the sentence.

CHAPTER VI.

Love that asketh love again,
Finds the barter nought but pain;
Love that giveth in full store,
Aye receives as much, and more.

Love, exacting nothing back,
Never knoweth any lack;
Love, compelling love to pay,
Sees him bankrupt every day.

LIFE in the sick-room—most of us know what that is; how the whole world narrows itself within four walls, and every fanciful grief and morbid imagining slips off, pressed down into nothingness by the weight of daily, hourly cares, and common-place, yet all-engrossing realities.

Christian was a born nurse,—and nurses, like poets, are born, not made. You may recognise the faculty in the little girl of ten years old,

as she steals into your room to bring you your breakfast, and takes the opportunity to arrange your pillow, and put your drawers in order, or do any other little helpful office which you may need. And you miss it, painfully, in the matron of sixty, who, with perhaps the kindest intentions, comes to nurse you, taking for granted that she is the best person you could possibly have about you; and yet you would be thankful to shut the door upon her, and struggle, suffer, die alone. As Arthur, child as he was, would rather have died than suffer near his sick-bed either of his two aunts.

Phillis, too,—he screamed whenever he saw her, and with a jealousy not unnatural, and which Mrs. Grey was rather sorry for than annoyed at, she came into the room continually. At last it became a question almost of life and death, for the fever ran high; and even Dr. Anstruther, cheery man as he was, began to look exceedingly grave. The child must be kept quiet, and how to do it?

For in this crisis Christian found out what every woman has to find out, soon or late, the weak points in her husband. She saw that, like many another good and brave man, he was in this matter quite paralysed; that she could rely only upon herself, and act for herself, or else tell

him what he was to do, and help him to do it, just like a child. She did not care for him the less for this—she sometimes felt she cared for him more; but she opened her eyes calmly to the facts of the case, and to her own heavy responsibility.

She consulted with Dr. Anstruther, and left him to explain things to whomsoever he would: then locked the door, and for eight days and nights suffered no one to cross the threshold of Arthur's room, except the doctor.

It was a daring expedient, but the desperation of the time, and Dr. Anstruther's consent and co-operation, gave her courage; she was neither timid nor ignorant; she knew exactly what to do, and she believed, if it were God's will to save Arthur's life, He would give her strength to do it.

"My boy's life—only his life!" she prayed, more earnestly than she had ever prayed in her life before, and then prepared for the long solitary vigil, of which it was impossible to foresee the end. In its terrible suspense she forgot everything except the present; day by day, and hour by hour, as they slipped heavily along. She ceased to think of herself at all, scarcely even of her husband; her mind was wholly engrossed by her poor sick boy.

Hers, though hitherto she had never loved him. For he was not loveable at all; that rough, selfish, headstrong Arthur, the plague of his aunts, and the terror of the nursery. But now when he lay on his sick-bed, lingering on from day to day, in total dependence on her care, with a heavy future before him, poor child!—for he seemed seriously injured,—there came into his stepmother's weak womanly heart a woman's passionate tenderness over all helpless things. She did to him, not only her duty, but something more. She learned to love him.

Had any one told her a while ago that she should stand for hours, watching every change in that pale face, whose common, uncomely features grew spiritualized with sickness, till she often trembled on their unearthly sweetness; that twenty times in the night she would start up from her uncomfortable sofa-bed, listening for the slightest sound; that the sight of Arthur eating his dinner (often prepared by her own hands, for the servants of the Lodge were strangely neglectful), or of Arthur trying to play a game at draughts, and faintly smiling over it, should cause her a perfect ecstasy of delight, Christian would have replied "Impossible!" But heaven sometimes converts our impossibles and

inevitables into the very best blessings we have; most right, most natural, and most dear.

As to Christian herself, she was, even externally, greatly changed. Pale as she looked, and no wonder, there was a light in her eye, and a firmness in her step, very different from those of the weary-looking woman who used to roam listlessly about the gloomy galleries, or sit silently working in the equally gloomy drawing-room with Miss Gascoigne and Miss Grey.

Poor Aunt Maria, in her regular daily visit—she dared venture no more—to the sick-room door, would sometimes say hesitatingly, "My dear, how well you look still! You are sure you are not breaking down?" And Christian, grateful for the only kindly woman's face she ever saw near her, would respond with a smile—sometimes with a kiss, which always alarmed Aunt Maria exceedingly.

As for Aunt Henrietta, she never came at all. Since the evening when she had marched out of the room in high dudgeon, she had taken not the smallest notice of the sick boy. His life or death was apparently of far less moment to her than her own offended dignity. Had he been left in her sole charge, she would doubtless have done her duty to him; but to stand by and see another

doing it? No!—a thousand times no! That part, insignificant in itself, and yet often one of the very sweetest and most useful in life's harmonies,—familiarly called "second fiddle," was a part impossible to be played by Miss Gascoigne.

What she did or said—though probably the first was little, and the other a great deal—was happily unknown to Mrs. Grey. Her one duty lay clear before her, to save her poor boy's life, if any human means could do it. And sometimes, when she saw the agony and anxiety in his father's face, Christian felt a wild joy in spending herself and being spent, even to the last extremity, if by such means she could repay to her most good and tender husband that never-counted, uncountable debt of love which nothing ever does pay except return in kind.

Concerning Arthur himself, the matter was simple enough now. All his fractiousness, restlessness, and innumerable wants were easy to put up with; she loved the child. And he, who (except from his father) had never known any love before, took it with a wondering complacency, half funny, half pathetic. Sometimes he would say, looking at her wistfully, "Oh, it's so nice to be ill!" And once, the first time she untied his right arm, and allowed it to move freely, he slipped it

round her neck, whispering, "You are very good to me, *mother*."

Christian crept away. She dared not clasp him or cry over him, he was so weak still; but she stole aside into the oriel window, her heart full almost to bursting.

After that, he always called her "mother."

The other two children she scarcely ever saw. The need for keeping Arthur quiet was so vital, that of course they were not admitted to his room, and she herself rarely left it. Dim and far away seemed all the world, and especially her own poor life, whether happy or miserable, compared with that frail existence which hung almost upon a thread.

At last the medical opinion was given that little Arthur might, with great care and incessant watching, ("which it is plain he will have, Mrs. Grey," added the old doctor, bowing and smiling) grow up to be a man yet.

When Dr. Anstruther said this, Christian felt as if the whole world had brightened.

She had no one to tell her joy to, for Dr. Grey was out; but she stood in her familiar retreat at the window—oh, what that window could have revealed of the last five weeks!—and her tears, long dried up, poured down like summer rain.

And then Dr. Grey came in, very much agitated; he had met the doctor in the street, and been told the glad tidings. She had to compel herself into sudden quietness, for her husband's sake; which, indeed, was a lesson now daily being learnt, and growing every day sweeter in the learning.

"Christian," he said, when they had talked it all over, and settled when and where Arthur was first to go out-of-doors, with various other matter-of-fact things which she thought would soonest calm the father's emotion—"Christian, Dr. Anstruther tells me my boy could not have lived but for you and your care. I shall ever remember this—ever feel grateful."

A pang—the full meaning of which she then did not in the least understand,—shot through Christian's heart. "You should not feel grateful to his *mother*."

"Do you mean, really, that you love him like —like a mother?"

"Of course I do."

Dr. Grey said nothing more, but his wife felt him put his arm round her. She leant her head against him, and, though she still wept, for the tears, once unsealed, seemed painfully quick to rise, still she was contented and at rest. Worn and weary a little; now the suspense was over the

reaction came, but very peaceful. Unconsciously there ran through her mind one of the foolish bits of poetry she had been fond of when a girl.

> "In the unruffled shelter of thy love,
> My bark leaped homeward from a stormy sea,
> And furled its sails, and like a nested dove—"

"Mother!" called out Arthur's feeble, fretful voice, and in a minute the poetry had all gone out of her head, and she was by her boy's side, feeding him, jesting with him, and planning how the first day of his convalescence should be celebrated by a grand festival, inviting the two others to tea in his room. It was her own room, from which he had never been moved since the first night. How familiar had grown the crimson sofa, the tall mirror, the carved oaken wardrobe! The bride had regarded these splendours with a wondering, half-uneasy gratitude; but now to Arthur's nurse and "mother" they looked pleasant, home-like, and dear.

"We will pull the sofa to the fire. Help, papa, please, and place the little table before it. And we will send written invitations, which papa shall deliver, with a postman's knock, at the nursery door. We won't send him one, I think?"

"Very well," said Dr. Grey, with a great pretence of wrath, "then papa will have to invite

himself, like the wicked old fairy at the christening of —— Who was it, Arthur?"

Arthur clapped his hands, which proceeding was instantly stopped by Christian. "It was the Sleeping Beauty, which you don't know one bit about, and I do, and ever so many more tales. She used to tell me them in the middle of the night, when I couldn't sleep, and they were so nice, and so funny! She shall tell you some after tea. And we'll make her sing too. Papa, did you ever hear her sing?"

"No," said Dr. Grey.

"Oh, but I have. She'll sing for *me*," returned Arthur, proudly. "She said she would, though she had meant never to sing again."

Christian blushed violently, for the boy in his unconscious way had referred to a little episode of his illness, when, having exhausted all efforts to soothe him into drowsiness, she had tried her voice, silent for many months,—silent since before she had known Dr. Grey. She had wished it so; wished to bury all relics of that time of her youth, deep down, so that no chance hand could ever dig them up again.

"Do you really sing?" asked Dr. Grey, a little surprised, and turning full upon her those grave, gentle, tender eyes.

She blushed, more painfully than ever; but

she answered steadily, "Yes, I was supposed to have a very fine voice. My father wished it cultivated for the stage. It might have been so, if things had been different."

"Would you have liked it?—the stage, I mean."

"Oh, no, no!" with a visible, unmistakeable shudder. "I would have resisted to the last. I hated it."

"Was that why you left off singing

It would have been so easy to tell a lie,—a little harmless white lie; but Christian could not do it. She could keep silence to any extent, but falsehood was impossible to her. She dropped her eyes; but the colour once more overspread her whole face, as she answered, distinctly and decisively, "No."

It surprised her somewhat afterwards, not then—her heart was beating too violently for her to notice anything much—that her husband asked her no further question, but immediately turned the conversation to Arthur's tea-party, in the discussion of which both were so eager to amuse the invalid, that the other subject dropped,—naturally, it appeared; anyhow, effectually.

But, when the other two children came in to see Arthur, he again recurred to her singing, which had evidently taken a strong hold upon his imagination.

"Papa, you must hear her. Mother, sing the song, with pretty little twiddle-twiddles in it,—far prettier than Aunt Henrietta's things. Something about 'warbling in her breath!'"

"Oh, no; not that," said Christian, shrinking involuntarily. What from? Was it from a ghostly vision of the last time she had sung it,—that is, properly, to a piano-forte accompaniment, played by fingers that had afterwards caught hold of *her* trembling fingers, and been a living comment on the song? It was that exquisite one from Handel's "Acis and Galatea":—

> "Love in her eyes sits playing,
> And sheds delicious death;
> Love on her lips is straying,
> And warbling in her breath."

Probably, never was there a melody which more perfectly illustrated that sort of love, the idealization of fancy and feeling, with just a glimmer of real passion quivering through it,—the light cast in advance by the yet unrisen day.

"Not that song, Arthur. It is rather difficult; besides, papa might not care to hear it."

"Papa might if he were tried," said Dr. Grey, smiling. "Why not do to please me what you do to please the children?"

So Christian sang at once,—ay, and that very song. She faced it. She determined she would,

with all the ghosts of the past that hovered round it. And soon she found how, thus faced, as says that other lovely song of Handel's which she had learned at the same time,

> "The wandering shadows, ghastly pale,
> All troop to their infernal jail:
> Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave."

Her ghosts slipped, one by one, into the grave of the past. She had begun her song feebly and uncertainly; but when she really heard the sound of her own voice echoing through the lofty room, with a gush of melody that the old walls could not have known for centuries, there came upon her an intoxication of enjoyment. It was that pure enjoyment which all true artists—be they singers, painters, poets—understand, and they only—the delight in mere creation, quite distinct from any sympathy or admiration of others; and, oh! how far removed from any mean vanity or love of praise!

Christian was happy—happy as a lark in the air, just to hear—and make—the sound of her own singing. Her face brightened; her figure, as she stood leaning against the mantelpiece, assumed a new grace and dignity. She was beautiful,—absolutely beautiful: and her husband saw it.

Was it fancy, if, glancing at her, Dr. Grey half sighed? Only for a moment; then he said cheerily,—

"Arthur was right. Children, tell your mother she is the best singer we ever heard in all our lives."

"That she is! She sings just like a bird in a tree. And then, you see, papa, she is our own bird."

Christian came down from the clouds at once, and laughed heartily at the idea of being Arthur's "own bird."

"Titia," said Dr. Grey, with sudden energy, as if the thought had been brewing in his mind for many minutes, "is there not a piano in the drawing-room? There used to be."

"Yes, and I practise upon it two hours every day," answered Letitia, with dignity. "But afterwards Aunt Henrietta locks it up and takes the key. She says it is poor mamma's piano, and nobody is to play upon it but me."

As the child said this in a tone so like Aunt Henrietta's, her father looked,—as Christian had only seen him look once or twice before, and thought that there might be circumstances under which anybody displeasing him would be considerably afraid of Dr. Arnold Grey.

"Did you know of this, Christian?"

"Yes," she answered, very softly, with a glance, half warning, half entreating, round upon the children. "But we will not say anything about it; I never did, and I had rather not do so now."

"I understand. We will speak of it another time."

But he did not; neither that night, nor for several days: and Christian felt only too thankful for his silence.

Sometimes, when after ringing at intervals of five minutes for some trifling thing, Barker had sent up "Miss Gascoigne's compliments and the servants couldn't be spared to wait up-stairs;" or the cook had apologised for deficiencies in Arthur's dinner, by "Miss Gascoigne wanted it for lunch;" and especially when to her various messages to the nursery no answer was ever returned—sometimes, it had occurred to Christian—gentle as she was, and too fully engrossed to notice small things,—that this was not exactly the position Dr. Grey's wife ought to hold in his—and her—own house. Still she said nothing. She trusted to time and patience. And she had such a dread of domestic war, of a family divided against itself.

Besides, some change must come, for in a day or two she would have to resume her ordinary duties, to take her place at the head of her husband's table, and once more endure the long mornings, the weary evenings, to meet and pass over the sharp speeches, the unloving looks, which made the continual atmosphere of the Lodge.

"Oh!" she thought to herself, glancing round upon those four walls of the sick-chamber which had seen, with much of anxiety, much also of love that never failed, and patience that knew no end, "I could almost say with Arthur, 'It is so nice to be ill!'"

He seemed to think the same; for on the day he left it he grumbled dreadfully at being carried in Phillis's strong arms,—which he had fiercely resisted at first,—to the drawing-room, where he was to hold his second tea-party—of aunts.

There they sat waiting, Aunt Maria fond and tearful, Aunt Henrietta grim and severe. And shortly,—nay before Arthur was well settled on the sofa, and lay pale and silent, still clinging to his stepmother's hand, the cause of her severity came out.

"Dr. Grey, what have you been doing? Buying a new piano?"

Yes, there it was, a beautiful Erard; and Dr. Grey stood and smiled at it, with an almost childish delight, as if he had done something exceedingly clever; which he certainly had.

"To buy a new piano! without consulting me! I never heard of such a thing. Mrs. Grey, this is your doing!"

"She never saw it before, or knew I meant to buy it, but now it is bought I hope she will like it. Try it, Christian."

His wife was deeply touched, so much so that she almost felt sorry for Aunt Henrietta. She would have given much to bring a little brightness, a little kindliness, into that worn, restless, unhappy face, true reflection of the nature which itself created its own unhappiness—as well as that of all connected with it. She said, almost humbly,—

"You are very good! I never had a piano of my own before. And I hope Miss Gascoigne will enjoy it as much as I shall myself."

The soft answer—never wasted upon fiercest wrath—threw a little oil upon Miss Gascoigne's. She spoke no more, but she resolutely turned her back upon the offending instrument. Christian struck a few chords, just to please her husband, and came away.

It was an uncomfortable tea-party; not nearly so merry as Arthur's first. After it, the boy wearily curled up on the sofa to sleep, and his father glanced round in search of his best friend —the big book.

"Stop a minute, Dr. Grey: before you retire to your study, as you always seem to do whenever all your family happen to be met sociably together, I have to ask you about that invitation to St. Mary's Lodge which came this morning."

Dr. Grey paused, and listened to a long explanation, ending in the decision (to which Chris-

tian passively submitted, for what must be done had best be done quickly), that he and his bride should make their long-delayed public appearance in Avonsbridge society at an evening party shortly to be given by the Master of St. Mary's.

"It is a musical party," explained Miss Gascoigne, when Dr. Grey, having quitted the room, Christian, for want of something to converse about, began to make a few polite inquiries concerning it. "So you have got your piano just in time, and may practise all day long, to be ready for your performance. Of course you will be asked to perform, since everybody knows about your father and his musical genius. By-the-bye, I met lately a gentleman, who said he knew Mr. Oakley, and was exceedingly surprised—at which I must confess I scarcely wondered—when he heard who it was that my brother-in-law had married."

"Oh, Henrietta!" pleaded poor Aunt Maria, with her most troubled look. But it was too late. Even Christian—quiet as her temper was, and strong her resolution to keep peace, at any price which cost nobody anything excepting herself—was roused at last.

"Miss Gascoigne," she said, and her eyes blazed and her whole figure dilated, "when your brother married me, he did it of his own free choice. He loved me. Whatever I was—he loved me. And whatever I may be now,

I at least know his dignity and my own too well to submit to be spoken to, or spoken of, in this manner. It is not of the slightest moment to me who among your acquaintances criticises myself or my marriage, only I beg to be spared the information afterwards. For my father,"—she gulped down a great agony, a sorrow darker than that of death—"he was my father. You had better be silent concerning him."

Miss Gascoigne was silent—for a few minutes. Perhaps she was a little startled, almost frightened—many a torturer is a great coward—by the sight of that white face, its every feature trembling with righteous indignation. Or, perhaps, some touch of nature in the hard woman's heart pleaded against this unwomanly persecution of one who had never injured her. But she could not hold her peace for long.

"There is no need to be violent, Mrs. Grey. It would be a sad thing, indeed, Maria, if your brother had married a violent-tempered woman."

"I am not that. Why do you make me seem so?" said Christian, still trembling. And then, her courage breaking down under a cruel sense of wrong: "Why cannot you see that I am weak and worn-out, longing for a little peace, and I cannot get it! I never did you any harm,—it is not my fault that you hate me. Why will you hunt me down and wear my life out? while I

bear it all alone, and have never told my husband one single word. It is cruel of you—cruel."

She sobbed, till Arthur's sudden waking up—he had been fast asleep on the sofa, or she might not have given way so much—compelled her to restrain herself.

Miss Gascoigne was moved; at least, as much as was in her nature to be. She said hastily, "There—there—we will say no more about it:" took up her work, and busied herself therewith.

For Aunt Maria, she did as she had been doing throughout the contest—the only thing Aunt Maria ever had strength to do—she remained neutral and passive;—cried and knitted—knitted and cried.

So sat together these three women; all good women in their way, who meant well, and might have lived to be a comfort to one another. Yet, as it was, they only seemed to live for one another's mutual annoyance, irritation, and pain.

A thunderstorm sometimes clears the air; and the passion of resistance into which Christian had been goaded, apparently cooled the family atmosphere for a few days. But she herself felt only a dead-weight—a heavy chill—which lay on her heart long after the storm was spent.

For the "gentleman," and his rude remark—if indeed he had made it, which she more than

doubted; aware how Miss Gascoigne, like all people who can only see things from the stand-point of their own individuality, was somewhat given to exaggeration—Christian heeded him not. The world might talk as it chose; she knew her husband loved her, and that he had married her for love.

And her boy loved her, too; and needed her sorely, as he would need for many a long day yet. It would take a whole year, Dr. Anstruther said, before the injury to the lung was quite recovered; and all fear of Arthur's falling into confirmed ill-health removed.

Thus duties, sweet as strong, kept continually weaving themselves about her once forlorn life; binding her fast, it is true, but in such pleasant bonds that she never wished them broken. Every day she grew safer and happier. And every day, as she looked on Dr. Grey's kind, good face, which familiarity was making almost beautiful, she felt thankful that—whether she loved it or only liked it—she should have it beside her all her days.

CHAPTER VI.

And do the hours slip fast or slow,
  And are ye sad or gay?
And is your heart with your liege lord, lady,
  Or is it far away?"

The lady raised her calm, proud head,
  Though her tears fell one by one:
"Life counts not hours by joys or pangs,
  But just by duties done.

And when I lie in the green kirkyard,
  With the mould upon my breast,
Say not that 'She did well—or ill,'
  Only, 'She did her best.'"

A DAY or two after this, Christian, returning from her daily walk, which was now brief enough, and never beyond the College precincts, met a strange face at the Lodge door. That is, a face not exactly strange, she seemed to have seen it before, but could not recollect how or where. Then she recalled it as that of a young daily governess, her predecessor at the Fergusons', who had left them, "to better herself,"

she said—and decidedly to the bettering of her pupils.

Miss Susan Bennett—as Christian had soon discovered, both pupils and parent being very loquacious on the subject—was one of those governesses whom one meets in hopeless numbers among middle-class families; girls, daughters of clerks or petty shopkeepers, above domestic service, and ashamed or afraid of any other occupation, which indeed is only too difficult to be found, whereby half-educated or not particularly clever young women may earn their bread. They, therefore, take to teaching as "genteel," and as being rather an elevation than not from the class in which they were born. Obliged to work, though they would probably rather be idle, they consider governessing the easiest kind of work, and use it only as a means to an end; which, if they have pretty faces and tolerable manners, is—human nature being weak, and life only too hard, poor girls!—most probably matrimony.

But governesses, pursuing their calling on this principle, are the dead-weight which drags down their whole class. Half educated, lazy, unconscientious, with neither the working faculty of a common servant, nor the tastes and feelings of a lady, they do harm wherever they go; they neither win respect nor deserve it. And the best

thing that could befall them would be to be swept down, by hundreds, a step lower in the scale of society; made to use their hands instead of their heads, or, at any rate, to learn themselves instead of attempting to teach others.

Christian—who, though chiefly self-taught, except in music, was a well-educated woman, and a most conscientious teacher—had been caused a world of trouble in undoing what her predecessor had done; and in the few times that the little Fergusons had met in the street their former instructress, who was a very good-looking and showy girl, she had not been too favourably impressed with Miss Bennett. But when she saw her coming out of the Lodge door, rather shabbier than beforetime, the March wind whistling through her thin, tawdry shawl, and making her pretty face look pinched and blue, Mrs. Grey, contrasting the comforts of her own life with that of the poor governess, felt compassionately towards her. So much so, that, though wondering what could possibly be her business at the Lodge, she assumed the mistress's kindly part, and bowed to her in passing, which Miss Bennett was in too great a hurry either to notice or return.

"Has that lady been calling here?" she asked of Phillis, whom she met bringing in Oliver from his afternoon walk.

"Lady!" repeated Phillis scornfully. "She 's only the governess."

"The governess!"

"Lor! didn't you know it, ma'am? And she coming to Miss Letitia every day for this week past!" And Phillis gleamed all over with malicious satisfaction that her mistress did not know it, and might naturally feel annoyed and offended thereat.

Annoyed Mrs. Grey certainly was, but she was not readily offended. Her feeling was more that of extreme vexation at the introduction here of the very last person whom she would desire to see Letitia's governess, and a vague wonder as to how much Dr. Grey knew about the matter. Of course, engrossed as she was with the charge of Arthur, it was quite possible that, to save her trouble, he and his sisters might have arranged it all. Only she wished she had been told—merely told about it.

Any little pain, however, died out when, on entering the drawing-room, she caught the warm delight of Arthur's eyes, turning to her as eagerly as if she had been absent from him a week, instead of half an hour.

"Oh, mother, I am so tired. Here have I been lying on this sofa, and Titia and somebody else—a great, big, red-cheeked woman—Titia says she

isn't a lady, and I must not call her so—have been strum-strumming on your pretty piano, and laughing and whispering between whiles. They bother me so. Please don't let them come again."

Christian promised to try and modify things a little.

"But she must come and practise here, Arthur. She is Miss Bennett—Titia's governess."

"Governess—a nice governess! Why, she hardly teaches her a bit. They were chattering the whole time, and I heard them plan to meet in Walnut-tree Court at five o'clock every evening, and go a walk with a gentleman—a kind gentleman, who would give Titia as many sweet things as ever she could eat."

Mrs. Grey stood aghast. This was the sort of thing that had gone on—or would have gone on if not discovered—with the little Fergusons.

"Are you sure of this, Arthur? If so, I must ring for Phillis at once."

"Oh, don't. Please don't. Phillis will only fly into a passion and beat her—poor Titia! I 'm very sorry I told of her. I wouldn't be a sneak if I could help it."

"My dear boy," said Christian fondly. "Well, I will not speak about it just yet, and certainly not to Phillis. Lie here till I see if Titia is still in the nursery. It is just five o'clock."

Yes, there the little damsel was, sitting as prim as possible over a book, looking the picture of industry and innocence.

"Miss Bennett has left for the day, has she not, Titia? You are not going out with her, or going out again at all?"

"No," said Titia, with her head bent down.

It was always Christian's belief—and practice—that to accuse a child, unproved, of telling a lie, was next to suggesting that lies should be told. She always took truth for granted, until she had unequivocal evidence to the contrary.

"Very well," she said kindly. "Is that a nice book you have? 'Arabian Nights?' Then sit and read it quietly till you go to bed. Good night, my dear."

She kissed her, which was always a slight effort; it was hard work loving Titia, who was so cold, and prim, and unchildlike, with so little responsiveness in her nature.

"I hope all is safe for to-day," thought Christian anxiously, and determined to speak to Titia's father the first opportunity; he was dining in Hall to-day, and afterwards they were to go to the long-delayed entertainment at the Vice-Chancellor's, which was to inaugurate her entrance into Avonsbridge "society."

Miss Gascoigne was full of it; and during all

the time that the three ladies were dining together she talked incessantly, so that, even had she wished, Mrs. Grey could not have got in a single word of inquiry concerning Miss Bennett. She, however, judged it best to wait quietly till the cloth was removed and Barker vanished.

Christian was not what is termed a "transparent" character. That is, she could "keep herself to herself," as the phrase is, better than most people. It was partly from habit, having lived so long in what was worse than loneliness, under circumstances when she was obliged to maintain the utmost and most cautious silence upon every thing; and partly because her own strong nature prevented the necessity of letting her mind and feelings bubble over on all occasions and to everybody, as is the manner of weaker but yet very amiable women. But, on the other hand, though she could keep a secret sacredly, rigidly—so rigidly as to prevent people's even guessing that there was a secret to be kept—she disliked unnecessary mysteries and small deceptions exceedingly. She saw no use and no good in them. They seemed to her only the petty follies of petty minds. She had no patience with them, and would take no trouble about them.

So, as soon as the ladies were alone, she said to Miss Gascoigne, outright, without showing either hesitation or annoyance:—

"I met Miss Bennett in the hall to-day. Why did you not tell me that you and Aunt Maria had chosen a governess for Letitia?"

Sometimes nothing puzzles very clever people so much as a piece of direct simplicity. Aunt Henrietta actually blushed.

"Chosen a governess? Well, so we did. We were obliged to do it. And you were so much occupied with Arthur. Indeed I must say," recovering herself from the defensive into the offensive position, "that the way you made yourself a perfect slave to that child, to the neglect of all your other duties, was—"

"Never mind that now, please. Just tell me about Miss Bennett. When did she come, and how did you hear of her?"

She spoke quite gently, in mere inquiry; she was so anxious neither to give nor to take offence, if it could possibly be avoided. She bore always in mind a sentence her husband had once quoted—and though a clergyman, he did not often quote the Bible, he only lived it:—"As much as in you lieth, live peaceably with all men." But she sometimes wondered, with a kind of sad satire, whether the same could ever, under any circumstances, be done with all women.

Alas! not with these, or rather this woman: Aunt Maria being merely the adjective of that very determined substantive, Aunt Henrietta.

She braced herself to the battle immediately.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Grey; but I cannot see what right you have to question me, or I to answer. Am I not capable of the management of my own sister's children, who have been under my care ever since she died, and in whom I never supposed you would take the slightest interest?"

This—after her charge of Arthur! when she had nursed the child back to life again, and knew that he still depended upon her for everything in life! But knowing it was so, the secret truth was sweet enough to sustain her under any heap of falsehoods. Opposing falsehoods too, directly contradicting one another—but Miss Gascoigne never paused to consider that. Lax-tongued people seldom do.

"I will not question the point of my interest in the children. If I cannot prove it in other ways than words, the latter would be very useless. All I wish to say is, that I should like to have been consulted before anything was decided as to a governess. And I am afraid Miss Bennett is not exactly the person I should have chosen."

"Indeed! And pray why not, may I ask? She is a most respectable person,—a person who knows her place. I am sure the deference with which she treats me, the attention with which she listens to all my suggestions, have given me the

utmost confidence in the young woman. All the more, because, I repeat, she knows her place. She is content to be a governess; she never pretends to be a lady."

The insult was so pointed, so plain, that it could not be passed over.

Christian rose from her seat. "Miss Gascoigne, seeing that I am here, at the head of my husband's table, I must request you to be a little more guarded in your conversation. I, too, have been a governess, but it never occurred to me that I was otherwise than a lady."

There was a dead silence; during which poor Aunt Maria cast imploring eyes at Aunt Henrietta, who perhaps felt that she had gone too far, for she muttered some vague apology about "different people being different in their ways."

"Exactly so; and what I meant to observe was, that my chief reason for doubting Miss Bennett's fitness to instruct Titia is what you yourself allow. If she is 'not a lady,' how can you expect her to make a lady of our little girl?"

"*Our* little girl!"

"Yes, our,"—the choking tears came as far as Christian's throat, and then were swallowed down again. "My little girl, if you will; for she is mine,—my husband's daughter; and I wish to see her grow up everything that his daughter

ought to be. I say again, I ought to have been consulted in the choice of her governess."

She stopped, for, accidentally looking out of the window, where the lengthened spring twilight still lingered in the cloisters, she fancied she saw, creeping from pillar to pillar, a child's figure; could it possibly be Titia's? Yes, it certainly was; Titia herself stealing through two sides of the quadrangle, and under the archway that led to Walnut-tree Court.

Without saying a word to the aunts,—for she would not have accused anybody, a child, or even a servant, upon anything short of absolute proof,—Christian went up to her room, from the window of which she could see into Walnut-tree Court. There, walking round and round, in the solitude which at this hour was customary in most colleges, she distinguished, dim as the light was, three figures, —a man, a woman, and a child. In all probability, Miss Bennett, her lover, and Titia: whom with a mixture of cunning and short-sightedness, she had induced to play propriety, in case any discovery should be made.

Still, the light was too faint to make their identity sure; and to send a servant after them on mere suspicion, would only bring trouble upon poor little Titia; besides disgracing, in the last manner in which any generous woman would

wish to disgrace another woman, the poor friendless governess, who, after all, might only be taking an honest evening walk with her own honest lover, as every young woman has a perfect right to do.

"And love is so sweet, and life so bitter! I'll not be hard upon her, poor girl!" thought Christian, with a faint sigh. "Whatever is done I will do myself, and then it can injure nobody."

So she put on shawl and bonnet, and was just slipping out at the hall-door, rather thankful that Barker was absent from his post, when she met Titia creeping stealthily in, not at the front door, but at the glass door, which led to the garden behind. To which garden there was only one other entrance, a little door leading into Walnut-tree Court, and of this door Barker usually kept the key. Now, however, it hung from the little girl's hand, the poor frightened creature, who the minute she saw her stepmother tried to run away upstairs.

"Titia, come back. Tell me where you have been, without Phillis or anybody, and when I desired you not to go out again?"

"It was only to—to fetch a crocus for Atty."

"Where is the crocus?"

"I—dropped it."

"And this key. What did you want with the key?"

"I—I don't know."

The lies failed, if they were lies; but perhaps they might have been partly true: the child hung her head and began to whimper. She was not quite hardened, then.

"Come here to me," said Christian, sadly and gravely, leading her to the glass door, so that what light there was could shine upon her face; "let me look if you have been telling me the truth. Don't be afraid; if you have I will not punish you. I will not be hard upon you in any case, if you will only speak the truth. Titia, a little girl like you has no business to be creeping in and out of her papa's house like a thief. Tell at once where have you been, and who was with you?"

The child burst out crying. "I daren't tell, or Phillis will beat me. She said she would if I stirred an inch from the nursery, while she went down to have tea with cook and Barker. And I thought I might just run for ten minutes to see Miss Bennett, who wanted me so."

"You were with Miss Bennett, then? Anybody else?"

"Only a gentleman," said Letitia, hanging her head and blushing, with that painful precocity of consciousness so sad to see in a little girl.

"What was his name?"

"I don't know. Miss Bennett didn't tell me. She only said he was a friend of hers, who liked little girls, and that if I could come and have a walk with them without telling Phillis or anybody, she would let me off all the hardest of my French lessons. And so—and so——Oh, hide me, there's papa at the hall-door, and Aunt Henrietta coming out of the dining-room. And Aunt Henrietta never believes what I say, even if I tell her the truth. Oh, let me run—let me run."

The child's terror was so uncontrollable that there was nothing for it but to yield; and she fled.

"Titia! Titia!" called out her father. "Christian, what is the matter? What was my little girl crying for?"

There was no avoiding the domestic catastrophe, even had Christian wished to avoid it, which she did not. She felt it was a case in which concealment was impossible—wrong. Dr. Grey ought to be told, and Miss Gascoigne likewise.

"Your little girl has been very naughty, papa; but others have been more to blame than she. Come with me—will you come too, Aunt Henrietta? and I will tell you all about it."

She did so, as briefly as she could, and in

telling it she discovered one fact,—which she passed over, and yet it made her glad,—that Dr. Grey, like herself, had been kept wholly in the dark about the engagement of Miss Bennett as governess.

"I meant to have told you to-day though, after I had given her sufficient trial," said Miss Gascoigne, sullenly: "I had with her the best of recommendations, and I do not believe one word of all this story. That is," waking up to the full meaning of what she was saying, "not without the most conclusive evidence."

"Evidence!" repeated Dr. Grey. "You have my wife's word, and my daughter's."

"Your daughter is the most arrant little liar I ever knew!"

The poor father shrank back. Perhaps he knew, by sad experience, that Aunt Henrietta's condemnation was not altogether without foundation. His look expressed such unutterable pain that Christian came forward and spoke out strongly, almost angrily.

"It is fear that makes a liar, even as harshness and injustice create deceit and underhandedness. Love a child and trust it, and if it does wrong punish it neither cruelly nor unfairly, and it will never tell falsehoods. Titia will not—she shall not, as long as I am alive to keep her to the truth."

Dr. Grey looked fondly at his wife's young, glowing face; and even Miss Gascoigne, the hard, worldly woman, viewing all things in her narrow, worldly way, was silenced for the time. Then she began again, pouring out a torrent of explanations and self-exculpations, which soon resolved themselves into the simple question, What was to be done? There—she ended.

"Don't ask me to do anything. I will not. I wash my hands of the whole matter. If the story be true, and Miss Bennett can be guilty of conduct so indecorous, it would never do for me to be mixed up in such an improper proceeding; and if untrue, and I accused her of it, I should find myself in a very unpleasant position. So, Mrs. Grey, since you have interfered in this matter, you must carry it out on your own responsibility. If you have taken a grudge against Miss Bennett,—which I did not expect, considering your own antecedents,—you must just do as you like concerning her. But, bless me, how the evening is slipping by! Come, Maria! I shall hardly have time to dress for the Vice-chancellor's."

So saying, Miss Gascoigne swept away, her silk skirts flowing behind her. Aunt Maria followed, with one pathetic glance at "dear Arnold;" and the husband and wife were left alone.

Dr. Grey threw himself into his armchair, and there came across his face the weary look, which Christian had of late learned to notice, indicating that he was no more a young man, and that his life had been longer in trials than even in years.

"My dear! I wish you women-kind could settle these domestic troubles among yourselves. We men have so many outside worries to contend with. It is rather hard!"

It was hard. Christian reproached herself, almost as if she had been the primary cause of this, the first complaint she had ever heard him make, and which he seemed immediately to regret having allowed to escape him.

"I don't mean, my dear wife, that you should not have told me this; indeed, it was impossible to keep it from me. It all springs from Aunt Henrietta. I wish she—But she is Aunt Henrietta, and we must just make the best of her, as I have done for nearly twenty years."

"And why did you?" rose irrepressibly to Christian's lips. The sense of wild resistance to injustice and wrong, so strong in youth, was still not beaten down. It roused in her something very like fierceness,—these gentle creatures can be fierce sometimes—to see a good man like Dr. Grey trodden down and domineered over by this

narrow-minded, bad-tempered woman. "I often wonder at your patience, and at all you forgive!"

"Seventy times seven," was the quiet answer. And Christian became silent and grave. "Still," he added, smiling, "a sin against oneself does not include a sin against another. The next time Henrietta speaks as she spoke to you just now, she and I will have a very serious quarrel."

"Oh, no, no! Not for my sake. I had rather die than bring dissension into this house."

"My poor child! people cannot die so easily. They have to live on and endure.—But what were we talking about? for I forget: I believe I do forget things sometimes;" and he passed his hand over his forehead. "I am not so young as you, my dear; and though my life has looked smooth enough outside, there has been a good deal of trouble in it. In truth," he added, "I have had some vexatious things perplexing me to-day, which must excuse my being so dull and disagreeable."

"Disagreeable!" echoed Christian, with a little forced sort of laugh—adding, in a strange, soft shyness, "I wish you would tell me what those vexatious things were! I know I am young, and foolish enough too; still, if I could help you—"

"Help me!" He looked at her eagerly, then

shook his head and sighed. "No, my child, you cannot help me. It is other people's business, which I am afraid I have no right to tell even to you. It is only that a person has come back to Avonsbridge, who, if I could suppose I had an enemy in the world—But here I am telling you."

"Never mind, you shall tell me no more," said Christian, cheerily. "Especially as I do not believe that in the wide world you could have an enemy. And now give me your opinion as to this matter of Miss Bennett.'

"First, what is yours?"

Christian pondered a little. "It seems to me that the only thing is for me to speak to her myself, quite openly and plainly, when she comes to-morrow."

"And then dismiss her?"

"I fear so."

"For having a lover?" said Dr. Grey, with an amused twinkle in his eye.

"Not exactly, but for telling Titia about it, and making use of the child for her own selfish needs. Do you consider me hard? Well, it is because I know what this ends in. Miss Gascoigne does not see it, but I do. She only thinks of 'propriety.' I think of something far deeper—a girl's first notions about those sort of things. It is cruel to meddle with them before their time—

to take the bloom off the peach, and the scent off the rose; to put worldliness instead of innocence, and conceited folly instead of simple, solemn, awful love. I would rather die, even now—you will think I am always ready for dying—but I would rather die, than live to think and feel about love like some women—ay, and not bad women either, whom I have known."

Mrs. Grey had gone on hardly considering what she was saying, or to what it referred; till she was startled to feel fixed upon her her husband's earnest eyes.

"You need not be afraid," said he, smiling. "Christian, shall I tell you a little secret? Do you know why I loved you? Because you are unlike all other women; because you bring back to me the dreams of my youth. And here," suddenly rising, as if he feared he had said too much, "we must put dreams aside, and arguments likewise, for Aunt Henrietta will never forgive us if we are late at this terrible evening party."

CHAPTER VII.

Down, pale ghost,
  What doest thou here?
The sky is cloudless overhead,
  The stream runs clear.

I drowned thee, ghost,
  In a river of bitter brine:
With whatever face thou risest up,
  Meet thou not mine!

Back, poor ghost!
  Dead of thy own decay:
Let the dead bury their dead!—
  I go my way.

WHILE she was dressing for it, the evening party ceased to be terrible even in Christian's imagination. She kept thinking over and over the talk she had had with Dr. Grey; what he had said, and what she had said, of which she was a little ashamed, now that her impetuous impulse had faded. Yet why? Why should she not speak out her heart to her own

husband? It began to be less difficult so to do; for, though he did not answer much, he never misunderstood her, never responded with those sharp, cold, altogether wide-of-the-mark observations which, in talking with Miss Gascoigne or Miss Grey, made her feel that they and she looked at things from points of view as opposite as the poles.

"They can't help that; neither, I am sure, can I," she often thought. And yet how, thus diverse, they should all live under the same roof together for months and years to come, was more than Christian could conceive.

Besides, now, she had at times a new feeling, —a wish to have her husband all to herself. She ceased to need the "shadowy third,"—the invisible barricade against total dual solitude, made by aunts or children. She would have been glad sometimes to send them all away, and spend a quiet evening hour, such as the last one, alone with Dr. Grey. It was so pleasant to talk to him;—so comfortable. The comfort of it lasted in her heart all through her elaborate dressing, which was rather more weariness to her than to most young women of her age.

Letitia assisted thereat; poor Titia, who, being sent for, had crept down to her stepmother's room, very humble and frightened, and received a few tender, serious words, not many, for the white

face was sodden with crying, and there was a sullen look upon it which not all Christian's gentleness could chase away. Phillis had discovered her absence, and had punished her; not with whipping, that was forbidden, but with some of the innumerable nursery tyrannies which Phillis called government. And Titia evidently thought, with the suspiciousness of all weak, cowed creatures, that Mrs. Grey must have had some hand in it,—that she had broken her promise and betrayed her to this punishment.

She stood aloof, poor little girl, tacitly doing as she was bidden, and acquiescing in everything, with her thin lips pressed into that hopeless line, or now and then opening to give vent to sharp, unchildlike speeches, so exceedingly like Aunt Henrietta's.

"Those are very pretty bracelets, but yours are not nearly so big as poor mamma's, and you don't wear half so many."

Was it that inherent feminine quality, tact or spite, according as it is used, which teaches women to find out, and either avoid or wound, one another's sore places, which made the little girl so often refer to "poor mamma?" Or had she been taught to do it?

Christian could not tell. But it had to be borne, and she was learning how to bear it. She answered, kindly,—

"Probably I do wear fewer ornaments than your mamma did, for she was rich, and I was poor. Indeed, I have no ornaments to wear except what your papa has given me."

"He gives you lots of things, doesn't he? Everything you have?"

"Yes."

"Do you like his doing it?"

"Very much indeed."

"Then was that the reason you married him? Aunt Henrietta said it was."

Christian's blood boiled. And yet Letitia only repeated what she had been told.

"My child," she said, feeling that now was the time to speak, and that the truth must be spoken, even to a child, "your aunt Henrietta makes a great mistake. She says, and believes, what is not true. I married your papa because I" —(oh, that she could have said "loved him!")— "I thought him the best man in the world. And so he is, as we all know well. Don't we, Arthur?"

"Hurrah! Three cheers for papa! The jolliest papa that ever was!" cried Arthur from the sofa, where, by his own special desire, he lay watching the end of the toilette.

Letitia was too ladylike to commit herself to much enthusiasm, but she smiled. If there was a warm place in that poor little frigid heart, papa certainly had it, as in every heart belonging to him.

"You look quite pretty," said she, condescendingly. "Some day when you go to parties you'll dress me and make me look pretty too, and take me with you? You won't keep me shut up in the nursery till I am quite old, as Phillis says you will?"

"Did Phillis say that?" Christian answered, with a sore sinking of the heart at the utter impossibility that under such influences these children should ever learn to love her.

"Phillis is a fool," cried Arthur, angrily. "When I get well again, if she ever says one word to me of the things she used to say about mother, won't I pitch into her, that's all!"

Christian smiled,—a rather sad smile, but she thought it best to take no notice, and soon Phillis came and fetched the two away.

After they were gone, the young stepmother stood by her bed-room fire, thinking anxiously of these her children, turning over in her mind plan after plan, as to how she should make them love her. But it seemed a very hopeless task still.

She looked into the blazing coals, and then began playing with a little chimney-piece ornament showing the day of the month—21st March.

Could it be possible that she had been married three months? Three months since that momen-

tous day when her solitary, self-contained life was swept out of the narrow boundaries of self for ever; made full and busy,—ay, and bright too. For it was not a sad face, far from it, which met her in the mirror above; it was a face radiant with youth and health, and the soft peacefulness which alone gives a kind of beauty.

Well, so best! She had not expected this, but she did not wish it otherwise.

The clock struck eight; she was after all ready too soon; so she wrapped her white opera cloak around her, and went down to the drawing-room. To pass the time, she thought she would sing a little, as indeed she now made a point of doing daily, and would have done, whether she cared for it or not, if only out of gratitude to the love which had delighted itself in giving her pleasure.

But she did care for it. Nothing, nobody, could quench the artist nature, which, the instant the heavy weight of sorrow was taken away, sprang up like a living fountain in this girl's soul. She sang, quite alone in the room, but with such a keen delight, such a perfect absorption of enjoyment, that she never noticed her husband's entrance, till he had stood for some minutes behind her chair. When he touched her, she started, then smiled.

"Oh, it is only you!"

"Only me. Did I trouble you?"

"Oh, no; was I not troubling you?"

"How, my dear?"

Christian could not tell. Anyhow she found it impossible to explain, except that she had fancied he did not care for music.

"Perhaps I do, perhaps I don't. But I care for *you*. Tell me," he sat down and took her hand, "does not Arthur's 'bird' sometimes feel a little like a bird in a cage? Do you not wish you lived in the world,—in London, where you could go to concerts and balls, instead of being shut up in a dull college with an old bookworm like me?"

"Dr. Grey! Papa!"

"Don't look hurt, my darling. But confess; isn't it sometimes so?"

"No! a thousand times no! Who has been putting such things into your head, for they never would come of themselves? It is wicked —wicked, and you should not heed them."

The tears burst from her eyes, to her husband's undisguised astonishment. He appeared so exceedingly grieved, that she controlled herself as soon as she could, for his sake.

"I did not mean to be naughty. But you should remember I am still only a girl,—a poor,

helpless, half-formed girl, who never had anybody to teach her anything, who is trying so hard to be good, only they will not let me!"

"Who do you mean by they?".

No, he evidently had not the slightest idea how bitter was the daily household struggle, the petty guerilla warfare which she had to bear. And, perhaps, it was as well he should not. She would fight her own battles; she was strong enough now. It was a step-by-step advance, and all through an enemy's country. Still, she had advanced, and might go on to the end, if she only had strength and patience.

"Hush! I hear Miss Gascoigne at the door. Please go and speak to her. Don't let her see I have been crying."

Of this, happily, there was little fear, Miss Gascoigne being too much absorbed in her own appearance, which really was very fine. Her black satin rustled, her black lace fell airily; and her whole figure was that of a handsome, well-preserved, middle-aged gentlewoman. So pleased was she with herself, that she was pleasant to every one else; and, when, half-an-hour after, Dr. Grey entered the reception-rooms of St. Mary's Lodge with his wife on one arm and his sister on the other, any spectator would have said, how very nice they all looked; what a fortunate man he

was, and what a happy family must be the family at Saint Bede's.

And, to her own surprise, when her first bewilderment was over, Christian really did feel happy. Her artistic temperament rejoiced in the mere beauty of the scene before her,—a scene to be found nowhere out of Avonsbridge. Lofty, grand old rooms, resplendent with innumerable waxlights; filled, but not too full, with an ever-moving, gorgeously-coloured crowd. Quite different from that of ordinary soirées, where the coup d'œil is that of a bed of variegated flowers, with a tribe of black emmets poised on their hind-legs inserted between. Here the gentlemen made as goodly a show as the ladies, or more so, many of them being in such picturesque costumes that they might have just stepped down from the old pictures which covered the walls. Innumerable flowing gowns, of all shapes and colours, marked the college dons; then there were the gaily-clad gentlemen commoners, and two or three young noblemen, equally fine; while, painfully near the door, a few meek-looking undergraduates struggled under the high honour of the Vice-Chancellor's hospitality.

As to the women, few were young, and none particularly lovely, yet Christian enjoyed looking at them. Actually, for the first time in

her life, did she behold "full dress;", the sparkle of diamonds, the delicate beauty of old point lace, the rustle of gorgeous silks and satins. She liked it;—childishly liked it. It was a piece of art,—a picture, in the interest of which her own part therein was utterly and satisfactorily forgotten. She was so amused with watching other people, that she never thought whether other people were watching her; and when, after half an hour's disappearance among a crowd of gentlemen, her husband came up and asked her if she were enjoying herself, she answered "Oh, so much!" with an ardour that made him smile.

And she did enjoy herself, even though a good many people were brought up to her and introduced, and by their not too brilliant remarks on it somewhat tarnished the brilliancy of the scene. But also she had some pleasant conversation with people far greater and grander and cleverer than she had ever met in her life; who, nevertheless, did not awe her at all, but led her on to talk, and to feel pleasure in talking; she being utterly unaware that her simple unconsciousness was making her ten times more charming, more beautiful than before; and that round the room were passing and repassing innumerable flattering comments on the young wife of the Master of Saint Bede's.

Only she thought once or twice, with an

amused wonder, which had yet some sadness in it, how little these people would have thought of her a year before; how completely they would ignore her now if she were not Dr. Grey's wife. And there came into her heart such a gush of—gratitude was it?—to that good man who had loved her just as she was,—poor Christian Oakley,—governess and orphan; in that saddest state of orphanage which is conscious that all the world would say she had need to be thankful for the same. She looked round for her husband several times, but missing him—and it felt a want, among all those strange faces—she sat down by Miss Gascoigne; who, taking the turn of the tide, now patronised "my sister, Mrs. Grey," in the most overwhelming manner.

It was after a whispered conference with Miss Gascoigne, that the wife of the Vice-Chancellor, herself young and handsome, and lately married, came up to ask Christian to sing.

Then, poor girl! all her fears and doubts returned. To sing to a whole roomful of people,—she had never done it in her life. It would be as bad as that night-mare fancy which used to haunt her, of being dragged forward to find the ten thousand eyes of a crowded theatre all focussed upon her, a sensation almost as horrible as being under a burning-glass.

"Oh no! not to-night. I would much rather not. Indeed, I cannot sing."

"May I beg to be allowed to deny that fact?" said the gentleman,—a young gentleman, upon whose arm the hostess had crossed the room,—of whom she, a stranger in Avonsbridge, knew only that he was a baronet and had fifteen thousand a-year.

"Well, Sir Edwin, try if you can persuade her. Mrs. Grey, let me present to you Sir Edwin Uniacke."

It was so sudden, and the compulsion of the moment so extreme, that Christian stood calm as death. Stood and bowed, and he bowed too, as in response to an ordinary introduction, to a perfect stranger. She was quite certain afterwards that she had not betrayed herself by any emotion, that, as seemed her only course, she had risen and walked straight to the piano, her fingers just touching Sir Edwin's offered arm; that she had seated herself, and begun mechanically to take off her gloves, without one single word having been exchanged between them.

The young man took his place behind her chair. She never looked towards him; never paused to think how he had come there, or to wonder over the easy conscience of the world, which had readmitted him into the very society whence he

had lately been ignominiously expelled. Her sole thought was that there was a song to be sung and she had to sing it, and go back as fast as she could into some safe hiding-place. Having accomplished this, she rose.

"Not yet, pray; one more song. Surely you know it, 'Love in thine eyes.'"

As the voice behind her—a voice so horribly familiar—said this, Christian turned round. To ignore him was impossible; to betray, by the slightest sign, the quiver of fear, of indignation, which ran through all her frame, that, too, was equally impossible. One thing only presented itself to her as to be done. She lifted up her cold, clear eyes, fixed them on him; and, equally cold and clear, her few common-place words fell:—

"No, I thank you; I prefer not to sing any more to-night."

What answer was made, or how, still touching Sir Edwin's arm, she was piloted back through the crowd to Miss Gascoigne's side, Christian had not the slightest recollection either then or afterwards: she only knew that she did it, and he did it, and that he then bowed politely and left her.

So it was all over. They had met, she and her sometime lover, her *preux chevalier* of a month: met, and she did not love him any more. Not

an atom! All such feelings had been swept away, crushed out of existence by the total crushing of that respect and esteem without which no good woman can go on loving. At least no woman like Christian could. Call her not fickle, nor deem it unnatural for love so to perish. After learning what she had learned, from absolute incontrovertible evidence (it is useless to enter into the circumstances, for no one is benefited by wallowing in unnecessary mire); that she, or any virtuous maiden, should continue to love this man, would have been a thing still more unnatural—nay, wicked.

No, she did not love him any more. She was quite sure of that. She watched his tall, elegant figure—he was as beautiful as Lucifer—moving about the rooms, and it seemed that his very face had grown ugly to her sight. She shivered to think that once—thank God, only once!—his lips had pressed hers; that she had let him say to her fond words, and write to her fond letters, and had even written back to him others, which, if not exactly love-letters, were of the sort that no girl could write except to a man in whom she wholly believed—in his goodness and in his love for herself.

What had become of those letters she had no idea; what was in them she hardly remem-

bered, but the thought of them made her grow hot and tremble. In an agony of shame, as if all the world were pointing at her—at Dr. Grey's wife,—she hid herself in a corner, behind the voluminous presence of Miss Gascoigne, and sat waiting, counting minutes like hours, till her husband should appear.

He came at last, his kind face all beaming.

"Christian, I have been having a long talk with —— But you are very tired." His eye caught, she knew it would at once, the change in her face. "My darling," he whispered, "would you not like to go home?"

"Oh yes, home! Take me home!" Christian replied, almost with a sob. She clung to his arm, and passed through the crowd with him. And whether she fully loved him or not, from the very bottom of her soul she thanked God for her husband.

CHAPTER VIII.

Teach me to feel for others' woe,
To hide the fault I see;
The mercy I to others show,
That mercy show to me.

BREAKFAST was just over on the morning following the *soirée* at the Vice-Chancellor's. Christian sat with the two aunts, quietly sewing.

Ay, very quietly, even after last night. She had taken counsel with her own heart, through many wakeful hours, and grown calm and still. Neither her husband nor Miss Gascoigne had once named Sir Edwin. Probably, Aunt Henrietta did not know him; and in the crowded party Dr. Grey might not have chanced to recognise him. Indeed, most likely the young man would take every means of avoiding recognition from the Master of his own College, whence he had been ignominiously dismissed. His appearance at Saint Mary's Lodge was strange enough, and

only to be accounted for by his having been invited by the Vice-Chancellor's young wife, who knew him only as Sir Edwin Uniacke, the rich, young baronet.

But, under shadow of these advantages, no doubt he could easily get into society again, even at Avonsbridge, and would soon be met everywhere. She might have to meet him,—she, who knew what she did know about him, and who, though there had been no absolute engagement between them, had suffered him to address her as a lover, for four bright April weeks, ending in that thunder-bolt of horror and pain, after which he never came again to the farm-house, and she never heard from him or of him one word more.

Ought she to have told all this to her husband? —was it her duty to tell him now?

Again and again the question recurred to her, full of endless perplexities. She and Dr. Grey were not like two young people of equal years. Why trouble him, a man of middle age, with what he might think a silly, girlish love-story? And, above all, why wound him by what is the sharpest pain to a loving heart, the sudden discovery of things hitherto concealed, but which ought to have been told long ago? He might feel it thus—or thus—she could not tell; she did not,

even yet, know him well enough to be quite sure. The misfortune of all hasty unions had been hers, —she had to find out everything after marriage. The sweet familiarity of long courtship, which makes peculiarities and faults excusable, nay, dear, just because they are so familiar that the individual would not be himself or herself without them—this sacred guarantee for all wedded happiness had not been the lot of Christian Grey.

Even now—though it was the mere ghost of a dead love, or dead fancy, which she had to confess to her husband—she shrank from confessing it. She would rather let it slip back to its natural Hades.

This was the conclusion she came to when cold, clear daylight put to flight all the bewilderments and perplexities which had troubled her through the dark hours; and she sat at the head of her breakfast-table, with her own little circle around her—the circle, which, with all its cares, became every day dearer and more satisfying, if only because it was her own.

And when she looked across to the husband and father, sitting so content, with the morning sun lighting up his broad forehead, wrinkled, it is true, but still open and clear, the honest brow of an honest man,—it was with a trembling gratitude that made religious every throb of Chris-

tian's once half-heathen heart. The other man, with his bold eyes that made her shiver, the grasp of his hand, from which her very soul recoiled,—Oh, thank God for having delivered her from him, and brought her into this haven of purity, peace, and love!

As she stopped her needlework to cross to Arthur's sofa—he insisted on being carried everywhere beside her, her poor, spoiled, sickly boy—as she arranged his pillows and playthings, and gave him a kiss or two, taking about a dozen in return—she felt that the hardest duty, the most unrequited toil, in this her home, would be preferable to that dream of Paradise in which she had once indulged, and out of which she must inevitably have wakened to find it a living hell.

The thanksgiving was still in her heart, when she heard a ring at the hall bell, and remembered, with sudden compunction, that this was Miss Bennett's hour, and she had to speak to her about the very painful matter which occurred yesterday.

She had quite forgotten it till this minute, as was not surprising. Now, with an effort, she threw off all thoughts about herself; this business was far more important, and might involve most serious consequences to the young governess, if obliged to be dismissed under circumstances, which, unless Miss Gascoigne's tongue could be

stopped, would soon be parroted about to every lady in Avonsbridge.

"Poor girl!" thought Christian, "she may never get another situation. And yet perhaps she has done nothing actually wrong—no worse wrong than many do—than I did!"—she sighed—"in letting herself be made love to, and believing it all true, and sweet, and sacred, when it was all —— But that is over now. And, perhaps, she has no friends, any more than I had: no home to cling to, no mother to comfort her. Poor thing! I must be very tender over her; very careful what I say to her."

And following this intention, instead of sending for Miss Bennett into the dining-room, as Miss Gascoigne probably expected, for she sat in great state determined to "come to the root of the matter," as she expressed it,—Mrs. Grey went out, and met her in the hall.

"You are the lady whom my sister-in-law engaged as governess?"

"Yes, ma'am. And you are Mrs. Grey?" Peering at her with some curiosity, for, as everybody knew everything in Avonsbridge, no doubt Miss Bennett was perfectly well aware that Dr. Grey's young wife was the *ci-devant* governess at Mr. Ferguson's.

"Will you walk up into my room? I wanted a word with you before lessons."

"Certainly, Mrs. Grey. I hope you are quite satisfied with my instruction of Miss Grey. Indeed, my recommendations—as I told Miss Gascoigne—include some of the very first families——"

"I have no doubt Miss Gascoigne was satisfied," interrupted Mrs. Grey, not quite liking the flippant manner, the showy style of dress, and the air at once subservient and forward; in truth, something which, despite her prettiness, stamped the governess as under-bred, exactly what Aunt Henrietta had said—"not a lady." "Your qualifications for teaching I have no wish to investigate—what I have to speak about is a totally different thing."

Miss Bennett looked uneasy for a minute, but Christian's manner was so studiously polite, even kindly, that she seemed to think nothing could be seriously wrong. She sat down composedly on the crimson sofa, and began investigating, with admiring, curious, and rather envious eyes, the handsome room, half boudoir, half bed-chamber.

"Oh, Mrs. Grey, what a nice room this is! How you must enjoy it! It's a hard life, teaching children."

"It is a hard life, as I know, for I was once a governess myself."

This admission, given so frankly, without the least hesitation, evidently quite surprised Miss Bennett. With still greater curiosity than the fine room, she regarded the fine lady who had once been a governess, and was not ashamed to own it.

"Well, all I can say is, you have been very lucky in your marriage, Mrs. Grey; I only wish I might be the same."

"That is exactly—" said Christian, catching at anything in her nervous difficulty as to how she should open such an unpleasant subject—"no, not exactly, but partly, what I wished to speak to you about. Excuse a plain, almost rude, question—which you can refuse to answer if you like; but, Miss Bennett, I should be very glad to know if you are engaged?"

"Engaged by Miss Gascoigne?"

"No; engaged to be married?"

Miss Bennett drew back, blushed a little,—a very little; looked much annoyed, and answered sharply, apparently involuntarily, "No!"

"Then—excuse me again—I would not ask if I did not feel it absolutely my duty, in order that we may come to a right understanding—but the gentleman you were walking with yesterday, when you asked Letitia to meet you in Walnut-tree Court, was he a brother, or cousin, or what?"

Susan Bennett was altogether confounded. "How did you find it all out? Did the child tell?—the horrid little—but, of course, she did! And then you set on and watched me! That was a nice trick for one lady to play another."

"You are mistaken," replied Christian, gravely; "I found this out by the merest accident; and as I cannot allow the child to do the same thing again, I thought it the most honest course to tell you at once of the discovery I made, and receive your explanations."

"You can't get them; I have a perfect right to walk with whom I please."

"Most certainly; but not to take Dr. Grey's little daughter with you as a companion. Don't you see, Miss Bennett"—feeling sorry for the shame and pain she fancied she must be inflicting—"how injurious these sort of proceedings must be to a little girl, who ought to know nothing about love at all—(pardon my concluding this is a love affair)—till she comes to it seriously, earnestly, and at a fitting age. And then the deception, under-handedness. Cannot you see how wrong it was to make secret appointments with a child, and induce her to steal out of the house unknown to both nurse and mother?"

"You are not her own mother, Mrs. Grey; it don't affect you."

"Pardon me," returned Christian, very distantly, as she perceived her delicacy was altogether wasted upon this impertinent young woman, who appeared well able to hold her own under any circumstances. "It does affect me so much that, deeply as I shall regret it, I must offer you a cheque for your three months' salary. Your engagement, I believe, was quarterly; and I must beg of you to consider it cancelled."

Miss Bennett turned red and pale; the offensive tone sank into one pitifully weak and cringing.

"Oh, Mrs. Grey! don't be hard upon me; I'm a poor governess, doing my best, and father has a large family of us, and the shop isn't as thriving as it was. Don't turn me away, and I'll never meet the young fellow again."

There was a little natural feeling visible through the ultra-humility of the girl's manner, and when she took out a coarse but elaborately laced pocket-handkerchief, and wept upon it abundantly, Christian's heart melted.

"I am very sorry for you—very sorry indeed; but what can I do? Will you tell me candidly, are you engaged to that gentleman?"

"No, not exactly; but I am sure I shall be by-and-by."

"He is your lover, then? he ought to be, if as Letitia says, you go walking together every evening."

"Well, and if I do, it's nobody's business but my own, I suppose; and it's very hard it should lose me my situation."

So it was. Mrs. Grey remembered her own "young days," as she now called them, remembered them with pity rather than shame. For she had done nothing wrong. She had deceived no one, only been herself deceived. In a very harmless fashion; just because, in her foolish, innocent heart, which knew nothing of the world and its wiles, she thought no honest man would ever be so mean, so cowardly, as to tell a girl he loved her, unless he meant it in the true, noble, knightly way,—a lover

"Who loved one woman, and who clave to her,"

—clave once and for ever. A vague tenderness hung about those days yet, enough to make her cast the halo of her sympathy over even common-place Susan Bennett.

"Will you give me your confidence? Who is this friend of yours, and why does he not at once ask you for his wife? Perhaps he is poor, and cannot afford to marry?"

"Oh, dear me! I'm not so stupid as to think of a poor man. Bless you! he has a title and an

estate too. If I get him, I shall make a splendid marriage."

Christian recoiled. Her sympathy was altogether thrown away. There evidently was not a point in common between foolish Christian Oakley, taking dreamy twilight saunters under the apple-trees, not alone; looking up to her cómpanion as something between Sir Launcelot and the Angel Gabriel;—and this girl, carrying on a clándestine flirtation, which she hoped would—and was determined to make—end in a marriage with a young man much above her own station, and just because he was so. As for loving him, in the sense that Christian had understood love, Miss Bennett was utterly incapable of it. She never thought of love at all—only of matrimony.

Still, the facts of the case boded ill. A wealthy young nobleman, and a pretty but coarse and half-educated shop-keeper's daughter,—no good could come of the acquaintance,—perhaps fatal harm. Once more Christian thought she would try to conquer her disgust, and win the girl to better things.

"I do not wish to intrude; no third person has a right to intrude upon these affairs; but I wish I could be of any service. You must perceive, Miss Bennett, that your proceedings are not quite right —not quite safe. Are you sure you know enough about this gentleman? How long have you been

acquainted with him? He probably belongs to the University."

Miss Bennett laughed. "Not he: at least not now. He got into a scrape and left it, and has only been back here a week; but I have found out where his estate is, and all about him. He has the prettiest property, and is perfectly independent. And a baronet, likewise. Only think"—and the girl, recovering her spirits, tossed her handsome head, and spread out her showy, tawdry gown. "Only think of being called 'Lady!' Lady Uniacke."

Had Miss Bennett been less occupied in admiring herself in the mirror, she must have seen the start Mrs. Grey gave — for the moment only, however—and then she spoke.

"Sir Edwin Uniacke's character here is well known. He is a bad man. For you to keep up any acquaintance with him is positive madness."

"Not in the least; I know perfectly what I am about, and can take care of myself, thank you. He has sown his wild oats and got a title and estate, which makes a very great difference. Besides, I hope I'm as sharp as he. I shall not let myself down, no fear. I'll make him make me Lady Uniacke."

Christian's pity changed into something very like disgust. Many a poor, seduced girl would have

appeared to her less guilty, less degraded, than this girl, who, knowing all a man's antecedents —which she evidently did—bad as he was, set herself deliberately to marry him. A well-planned mercenary marriage, by which she might raise herself out of her low station into a higher, and escape from the drudgery of labour into ease and splendour.

And yet, is not the same thing done every day in society by charming young ladies, aided and abetted by most prudent, respectable, and decorous fathers and mothers? Let these who think themselves so sinless cast the first stone at Susan Bennett.

But to Christian, who had never been in society, and did not know the ways of it, the sensation conveyed was one of absolute repulsion. She rose.

"I fear, Miss Bennett, that, if we continued this conversation for ever, we should never agree. It only proves to me more and more the impossibility of your remaining my daughter's governess. Allow me to pay you, and then let us part at once."

But the look of actual dismay which came over the girl's face once more made her pause.

"You send me away, with no recommendation—and I shall never get another situation—

and I have hardly a thing to put on—and I'm in debt awfully. You are cruel to me, Mrs. Grey, —you that have been a governess yourself." And she burst into a passion of hysterical crying.

"What can I do?" said Christian sadly. "I cannot keep you—I dare not. And it is equally true that I dare not recommend you. If I could find anything else—not with children—something you really could do, and which would take you away from this town."

"I'd go anywhere—do anything to get my bread; for it comes to that. If I went home and told father this, if he found out why I had lost my situation, he'd turn me out of doors. And except this cheque, which is owed nearly all, I haven't one halfpenny. I really haven't, Mrs. Grey. It's all very well for you to talk—you in your fine house and comfortable clothes—but you don't know what it is to be shabby, cold, miserable. You don't know what it is to be in dread of starving."

"I do," said Christian solemnly. It was true.

The shudder which came over her at thought of these remembered days obliterated every feeling about the girl, except the desire to help her, blame-worthy though she was, in some way that could not possibly injure any one else.

Suddenly she recollected that Mrs. Ferguson

was in great need of some one to take care of Mr. Ferguson's old, blind mother, who lived forty miles distant from Avonsbridge. If she spoke to her about Miss Bennett, and explained, without any special particulars, that, though unfit to be trusted with children, she might do well enough with an old woman, in a quiet village, Mrs. Ferguson, whose kind-heartedness was endless, might send her there at once.

"Will you go? and I will tell nobody my reasons for dismissing you," said Christian, as earnestly as if she had been asking instead of conferring a favour. Her kindness touched even that bold, hard nature.

"You are very good to me; and, perhaps, I don't deserve it."

"Try to deserve it. If I get this situation for you, will you make me one promise?"

"A dozen."

"One is enough—that you will give up Sir Edwin Uniacke?"

"How do you mean?"

"Don't meet him—don't write to him—don't hold any communication with him for three months. If he wants you, let him come and ask you, like an honest man."

Miss Bennett shook her head. "He's a baronet, you know."

"No matter. An honest man and an honest woman are perfectly equal, even though one is a baronet and the other a daily governess. And, if love is worth anything, it will last three months; if worth nothing, it had better go."

But even while she was speaking—plain truths which she believed with her whole heart—Christian felt, in this case, the bitter satire of her words.

Susan Bennett only smiled at them, in a vague, uncomprehending way. "Would you have trusted your lover—that means Dr. Grey, I suppose—for three months?"

Mrs. Grey did not reply. But her heart leaped to think how well she knew the answer. No need to speak of it, though! It would be almost profanity to talk to this woman, who knew about as much of it as an African fetish-worshipper knows of the Eternal—of that love which counts fidelity not by months and years; which, though it has its root in mortal life, stretches out safely and fearlessly into the life everlasting.

"Well, I 'll go, and, perhaps, my going away will bring him to the point," was the fond resolution of Miss Susan Bennett.

Mrs. Grey, infinitely relieved, wrote the requisite letters, and dismissed her; determined to call that day and explain as much of the

matter to honest Mrs. Ferguson as might put the girl in a safe position, where she would have a chance of turning out well, or, at least, better than if she had remained at Avonsbridge.

Then Christian had time to think of herself.—Here was Sir Edwin Uniacke—this daring, unscrupulous man—close at her very doors; meeting her at evening parties; making acquaintance with her children, for Titia had told her how kind the gentleman was, and how politely he had inquired after her "new mamma."

Of vanity, either to be wounded or flattered, Christian had absolutely none. And she had never read French novels. It no more occurred to her that Sir Edwin would come and make love to her, now she was Dr. Grey's wife, than that she herself should have any feeling—except pity—in knowing of his love-affair with Miss Bennett. She was wholly and absolutely indifferent with regard to him and all things concerning him. Even the events of last night and this morning were powerless to cast more than a momentary gravity over her countenance—gone the instant she heard her husband calling her from his open study-door.

"I wanted to hear how you managed with Miss Bennett, you wise woman. Is it a lover?"

"I fear so, and not a creditable one. But I

am certain of one thing. She does not love him —she only wants to marry him."

"A distinction with a difference," said Dr. Grey, smiling. "And you don't agree with her, my dear?"

"I should think not!"

Again Dr. Grey smiled. "How fiercely she speaks! What a tiger this little woman of mine could be if she chose! And so she absolutely believes in the old superstition that love is an essential element of matrimony?"

"You are laughing at me."

"No, my darling, God forbid! I am only—happy."

"Are you really, really happy? Do you think I can make you so—I, with all my unworthinesses?"

"I am sure of it."

She looked up in his face, from out of his close arms, and they talked no more.

CHAPTER IX.

Get thee behind me, Satan!
I know no other word:
There is a battle that must be fought,
And fought but with the sword.

The clear, sharp, stainless, glittering sword
Of purity divine:
I'll hew my way through a host of fiends,
If that strong sword be mine.

"I WISH, Mrs. Grey, you would learn to hold yourself a little more upright, and look a little more like the Master's wife —a lady in as good a position as any in Avonsbridge—and a little less like a Resignation or a Patience on a monument."

"I am sure, I beg your pardon," said Christian, laughing, "I have not the slightest feeling either of resignation or patience. I am afraid I was thinking over something much more worldly, —that plan about Miss Bennett's new situation

of which I have just been telling you,"— told as briefly as she could, for it was not very safe to trust Miss Gascoigne with anything. "Also, of the people we met last night at the Vice-Chancellor's."

"And that reminds me,—why don't you go and change your dress? I hate a morning gown, and I wish you particularly to look as respectable as you can.—We are sure to have callers to-day."

"Are we? Why?"

"To inquire for our health after last night's entertainment. It is a customary attention; but, of course, you cannot be expected to be acquainted with these sort of things. Besides, one gentleman especially asked my permission to call to-day —a man of position and wealth, whose acquaintance——"

"Oh, please tell me about him after I come back," said Christian, hopelessly; "and I will go and dress at once."

"Take that boy with you. He never was allowed to be in the drawing-room. Get up, Arthur," in the sharp tone in which the most trivial commands were always conveyed to the children, which, no doubt, Miss Gascoigne thought —as many well-meaning parents and guardians do think—is the best and safest assertion of

authority. But it had made of Letitia a cringing slave, and of Arthur a confirmed rebel, as he now showed himself to be.

"I won't go, Aunt Henrietta! I like this sofa. I'll not stir an inch!"

"I command you! Obey me, sir!"

Arthur pulled an insolent face, at which his aunt rose up and boxed his ears.

This sort of scene had been familiar enough to Christian in the early days of her marriage. It always made her unhappy, but she attempted no resistance. Either she felt no right, or she had no courage. Now, things were different.

She caught Miss Gascoigne's uplifted hand, and Arthur's, already raised to return the blow.

"Stop, you must not touch that child. And, Arthur, how can you be so naughty! Beg your aunt's pardon immediately."

But Arthur began to sob and cough—that ominous cough which was their dread and pain still. It did not touch the heart of Aunt Henrietta.

"We shall see who is mistress here. I will at once send for Dr. Grey. Maria, ring the bell."

Poor Aunt Maria, the most subservient of women, was about to do it, when fate interfered in the shape of Barker and a visiting card, which changed the whole current of Miss Gascoigne's intentions.

"Sir Edwin Uniacke!—the very gentleman I was speaking of. I shall be delighted to see him. Show him up immediately."

Which was needless, for he had followed Barker to the door. There he stood,—a graceful, well-appointed, fashionable young man, with not a hair awry in his black curls, not a shadow on his handsome face, perfectly satisfied with himself and his fortunes. A little flushed, perhaps, it might be with what he would call the "pluckiness" of coming thus to "beard the lion in his den," to visit the Master of his late College. All men have some good in them, and the good in this man was that, if a scapegrace, he was not a weak villain, not a coward.

"How kind of you! I am delighted to find a young gentleman so punctual in his engagements with an old woman," said Miss Gascoigne with mingled dignity and *empressement*. "Sir Edwin Uniacke, my sister, Miss Grey; Mrs. Grey, my sister-in-law."

Certainly, Aunt Henrietta's "manners" were superb.

Arthur lay crying and coughing still, but his luckless condition before visitors was covered over by these beautiful "manners," and by the flow of small-talk which at once began, and in which it was difficult to say who carried off the position best—

the young man or the elderly woman. Both deserved equal credit from that "world" to which they both belonged.

Presently a diversion was created by Christian's rising to carry Arthur away.

"You need not go," said Miss Gascoigne. "Ring for Phillis. The child has been ill, Sir. Edwin, and Mrs. Grey has made herself a perfect slave to him."

"How very—ahem!—charming!" said Sir Edwin Uniacke.

Phillis appeared, but Arthur clung tighter than ever to his stepmother's neck. Nor did she wish to release him.

"I thank you; no. I can carry him quite easily," she replied to Sir Edwin's politely offered help; which was, indeed, the only sentence she had attempted to exchange with him. With her boy in her arms she quitted the room, and did not return thither all the afternoon.

It was impossible she could. Without any prudishness, without the slightest atom of self-distrust or fear to meet him, every womanly feeling in her kept her out of his way. Here was a young man whom she had once ignorantly suffered to make love to her, nay,—loved, in a foolish, girlish way; a young man, whom she now knew—and he must know she knew it—no virtuous girl

could or ought to have regarded with a moment's tenderness. Here was he insulting her by coming to her own house,—her husband's house—without the permission of either. Had he been humble or shamefaced, she might have pitied him; for all pure hearts have such infinite pity for sinners. She would have wished him repentance, peace, and prosperity; and gone on her way, as he on his, each feeling very kindly to the other, but meeting, and desiring to meet, no more. Now, when he obtruded himself so unhesitatingly, so unblushingly, on the very scene of his misdoings and disgrace, pity was dried up in her heart, and indignation took its place.

"How dare he?" she thought, and nothing else but that. There was not one reviving touch of girlish admiration, not one thrill of self-complacent emotion, to see, what she could not help seeing, under his studiedly courteous manner, that he had forgotten, and meant her to feel he had forgotten, not a jot of the past. Whatever the episode of Susan Bennett might mean—if indeed such a man was not capable of carrying on a dozen such little episodes—his manner to Christian plainly showed that he admired her still; that he saw no difference between the pretty maiden Christian Oakley and the matron Christian Grey, and expressed this fact by tender tones and glances, alas, only

too familiarly known by her of old. "How dared he?"

Christian was a very simple woman. She knew nothing at all of that fashionable world which in its *blasé* craving for excitement, delights, both in life and in books, to tread daintily on the very confines of guilt. She was not ignorant. She knew what sin was, as set forth in the Ten Commandments, but she understood absolutely nothing of that strange leniency or laxity which, now-a-days, makes vice so interesting as to look like virtue, or mixes vice and virtue together in a knot of circumstances until it is difficult to distinguish right from wrong.

Christian Grey was a wife. Therefore, both as wife and as woman, it never occurred to her, as the remotest possibility, that she could indulge in one tender thought of any man not her husband, or allow any man to lift up the least corner of that veil of matronly dignity with which every married woman, under whatever circumstances she has married or whatever may befall her afterwards, ought to enwrap herself for ever. "When I am dead," says Shakespeare's Queen Katherine,

> "Let me be used with honour. Strew me over
> With maiden flowers, that all the world may know
> I was a chaste wife to my grave."

But Christian thought of something beyond the

world. The "honour" lay with herself alone; or, like her marriage vow, between herself, her husband, and her God. She was conscious of no dramatic struggles of conscience, no picturesque persistence in duty: she arrived at her end without any ethical or metaphysical reasoning, and took her course just because it seemed to her impossible there could be any other course to take.

It was a very simple one—total passiveness and silence. The young man could not come to the Lodge very often, even if Miss Gascoigne invited him ever so much, and was really as charmed with him as she appeared to be. And no wonder. He was one of those men who charm everybody. Perhaps because he was not deliberately bad, else how could he have attracted Christian Oakley? He had that rare combination of a brilliant intellect, an æsthetic fancy, strong passions, and a weak moral nature, which makes some of the most dangerous and fatal characters the world ever sees.

But be he what he might, he could not force his presence upon Christian against her will. "No, I am not afraid," she said to herself; "how could I be—with these?"

For, all the time she sat meditating, Arthur lay half asleep near her. And little Oliver, who had returned to his old habit of creeping about

her room whenever he could, sat playing with his box of bricks on the hearth-rug at her feet, every now and then lifting up eyes of such heavenly depth of innocence, that she felt almost a sort of compassion for the erring man who had no such child-angels in his home; nothing and no one to make him good, or to teach him, ere it was too late; that, even in this world, the wages of sin is death, and that the only true life is that of purity and holiness.

Christian spent the whole afternoon with her children. They tried her a good deal, for Arthur was fractious, and Oliver went into one of his storms of passion, which upon him, as once upon his elder brother, were increasing day by day. It was impossible it should be otherwise under the present nursery rule.

She sat and thought over plan after plan of getting Oliver more out of Phillis's hands—not by any open revolution, for she was tender over even the exaggerated rights of such a long faithful servant, but by the quiet influence which generally accomplishes much more than force. Besides, time would do as much as she could, and a great deal more—it always does.

Almost smiling at herself for the very practical turn which her meditations were beginning invariably to take—such a contrast to the dreamy

musings of old—Christian sent the children away and hastily dressed for dinner.

It was the first time she had taken her place at the dinner-table since Arthur's illness, and she felt glad to be there. She sat, with sweet, calm brow, and lustrous smiling eyes, a picture such as it does any man good to gaze at from his table's foot and know that it is his own wife, the mistress of his household, the directress of his family, in whom her husband's heart may safely trust for ever.

Dr. Grey seemed to feel it, though he said no more than that "it was good to have her back again." But his satisfaction did not extend itself to the rest.

Miss Gascoigne was evidently greatly displeased at something. Angry were the looks she cast around, and grim was the silence she maintained until Barker had disappeared.

"Now," said Christian, "shall we send for the children?"

"No," said Miss Gascoigne, "at least not until I have said a word which I should be sorry to say before young people. Dr. Grey, I wish that you, who have some knowledge of the usages of society, would instruct your wife in them a little more. I do not expect much from her, but still, now that she is your wife, some knowledge of manners, or even common civility ——"

"What have I done?" exclaimed Christian, half alarmed and half amused.

Miss Gascoigne took no notice, but continued addressing Dr. Grey:—

"I ask you, as a gentleman, when other gentlemen come to this house to pay their respects to me—that is, to the ladies generally,—ought Mrs. Grey to take the earliest opportunity of escaping from the drawing-room, nor return to it the whole time the visitors stay? No doubt she is unused to society, feels a little awkward in it, but still——"

"I understand now," interrupted Christian. "Yes, I did this afternoon exactly as she says. I am fully aware of the fact."

"And pray, who was the gentleman to whom you were so very rude?" asked Dr. Grey, smiling.

Christian replied without any hesitation,—and oh! how thankful that she was able to do so,—"It was Sir Edwin Uniacke."

But she was not prepared for the start and flash of sudden anger with which her husband heard the name.

"What! has *he* called at my house? That is more effrontery than I gave him credit for."

"Effrontery!" repeated Miss Gascoigne, indignantly. "It is no effrontery in a gentleman

of his rank and fortune, a visitor at Avonsbridge, to pay a call at Saint Bede's Lodge. Besides, I gave him permission to do so. He was exceedingly civil to me last night, and I must say he is one of the pleasantest young men I have met for a long time. What do you know against him?"

"What do I know?" echoed the Master, and stopped. Then added, "Of course you might not have heard; the Dean and I keep these things private as much as we can; but he was 'rusticated' a year and a half ago."

Miss Gascoigne might have known this fact or not; anyhow, she was determined not to yield her point.

"Well, and if he was, doubtless it was for some youthful folly,—debt, or the like. Now he has come into his property, he will sow his wild oats and become perfectly respectable."

"I hope so, I sincerely hope so," said Dr. Grey, not without a trace of agitation in his manner, deeper than the occasion seemed to warrant. "But, in the meantime, he is not the sort of person whom I should wish the ladies of my family to have among their visiting acquaintance."

The argument had now waxed so warm that both parties forgot, or appeared to forget Christian, who sat silent, listening to it all,—listening with a kind of wondering eagerness as to what

her husband would say,—her husband, a man in every way the very opposite of this man—Sir Edwin Uniacke. How would he feel about him? how judge him? or how much had he known of him to judge him by?

On this last head Dr. Grey was impenetrable. He parried, or gave vague general replies to all Miss Gascoigne's questions. She gained nothing except the firm, decided answer, "I will not have Sir Edwin Uniacke visiting at the Lodge."

"But why not?" insisted Miss Gascoigne, roused by opposition into greater obstinacy. "Did we not meet him at the Vice-Chancellor's? And he told me of two or three houses where we should be sure to meet him again next week."

"I cannot help that, but in my own house I choose my own society."

"Your reasons?" insisted Miss Gascoigne, now seriously angry. "It is unfair to act so oddly,—I must say so ridiculously, without giving a reason."

Dr. Grey paused a moment, and seemed to ponder before he answered.

"My reason, so far as I can state it, is that this young man holds, and puts into open practice, opinions which I wholly condemn, and consider unworthy of a Christian, an honest man, or even a decent member of society."

"And pray what are they?"

"It is difficult to explain them to a woman. Do not think me hard," he added, and his eyes wandered round to his wife, though he still addressed only his sister. "A man may fall and rise again—and we know Who pitied and helped to raise all fallen sinners. But sin itself never ceases to be sin; and while impenitent can neither be forgiven nor blotted out. If a man or a woman—there is no difference—came to me and said, 'I have erred, but I mean to err no more,' I hope I would never shut my door against either; I would help, and comfort, and save both, in every possible way. But a man who continues in sin, hugs it, loves it, calls it by all manner of fine names, and makes excuses for it, after the fashion of the world—the world may act as it chooses towards him, but there is only one way in which I can act."

"And what is that?" asked Miss Gascoigne, in astonishing meekness.

"I shut my door against him. Not injuring him, or pharisaically condemning him, but merely showing to him, and to all others, that I consider sin to be sin, and call it so. Likewise, that I will have no fellowship with it, whether it is perpetrated by the beggar in the streets or the prince on the throne; that no consideration, either of worldly advantage, or dread of what society may

say or do or think, shall ever induce me to let cross my threshold, or to bring into personal association with my family, any man who, to my knowledge, leads an unvirtuous life."

"Which most indecorous fact, as regards Sir Edwin, not only yourself, but your wife apparently, was quite aware of. Very extraordinary!"

This Parthian thrust was sharp indeed, but Dr. Grey bore it.

"If she was aware of it—which is not at all extraordinary—my wife did perfectly right in acting as she has done. It only shows, what I knew well before, that she and her husband think alike on this, as on most other subjects."

And he held out his hand to Christian. She could willingly have fallen at his feet. Oh, how small seemed all dreams of fancy, or folly of passionate youth, compared with the intense emotion,—what was it, reverence or love?—that was creeping slowly and surely into every fibre of her being, for the man, her own wedded husband, who satisfied at once her conscience, her judgment, and her heart.

While these two exchanged a hand-grasp and a look,—no more,—but that was enough, Miss Gascoigne sat, routed, but unconquered still. She might have made one more effort at warfare;

but that Barker opportunely entered with the evening post-bag.

"Barker!" said Dr. Grey, as the man was closing the door.

"Yes, Master."

The Master paused a second before speaking. "You know Sir Edwin Uniacke?"

"To be sure, sir," with a repressed twitch of the mouth, which showed he knew only too much, as Barker was apt to do of all College affairs.

"If he should call again, say the ladies are engaged; but should he ask for me, show him at once to my study."

"Very well, Master."

And Barker, as he went out of the dining-room, broke into a broad grin. But it was behind the back of the Master.

CHAPTER X.

A warm hearth, and a bright hearth, and a hearth swept clean,
Where the tongs don't raise a dust, and the broom isn't seen;
Where the coals never fly abroad, and the soot doesn't fall,
Oh, that's the fire for a man like me, in cottage or in hall.

A light boat, and a tight boat, and a boat that rides well,
Though the waves leap around it and the winds blow snell:
A full boat, and a merry boat, we'll meet any weather,
With a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull altogether.

SIR EDWIN UNIACKE did not appear again at the Lodge, or not further than the hall, where Christian in passing saw several of his cards lying in the card-basket. And, two Sundays, in glancing casually down the row of strangers who so often frequented the beautiful old chapel of Saint Bede's, she thought she caught sight of that dark, handsome face which had once seemed to her the embodiment

of all manly beauty. But she looked steadily forward, neither seeking nor shrinking from recognition. There was no need. As she passed out of the chapel, leaning on her husband's arm, the grave, graceful woman, composed rather than proud, Sir Edwin Uniacke must have felt that Christian Grey was as far removed from him and the like of him as if she dwelt already in the world beyond the grave. But this, perhaps, only made him the more determined to see her.

Now and then, in her walks with Phillis and the children,—she now never walked alone,—she was certain she perceived him in the distance; his slight tall figure, and peculiar way of swinging his cane, as he strolled down the long avenues, now glowing into the beauty of that exquisite May time which Avonsbridge people never weary of praising.

But still, if it were he, and if they did meet, what harm could it do to her? She could always guard herself by a lady's strongest armour,—perfect courtesy. Even should he recognise her, it was easy to bow and pass on, as she made up her mind to do, should the occasion arrive.

It never did, though several times she had actually been in the same drawing-room with him. But it was in a crowded company, and he either did not see her, or had the good taste to assume that

he had not done so. And Miss Gascoigne, whose eye he caught, had only given him a distant bow.

"I shall bow, in spite of Dr. Grey and his crotchets," said she. "But I suppose you are too much afraid of your husband."

Christian did not reply, and the conversation dropped.

One good thing cheered her. Sir Edwin Uniacke remained in Avonsbridge, and Miss Susan Bennett was still staying, and doing well, in the house of the blind old woman, forty miles away.

Shortly, her mind became full of far closer cares.

The domestic atmosphere of the Lodge was growing daily more difficult to breathe in. What is it that constitutes an unhappy household? Not necessarily a wicked or warring household, but still not happy; devoid of that sunniness which, be the home ever so poor, makes it feel like "a little heaven below" to those who dwell in it, or visit it, or even casually pass it by. "See how these Christians love one another," used to be said by the old heathen world; and the world says it still, nay is compelled to say it, of any real Christian home. Alas! it could not always be said of Dr. Grey's.

Perhaps, in any case, this was unlikely. There were many conflicting elements therein. Whatever

may be preached, and even practised sometimes, satisfactorily, about the advantages of communism, the law of nature is that a family be distinct within itself; should consist of father, mother, and children, and them only. Any extraneous relationships admitted therein, are always difficult and generally impossible. In this household, long ruled theoretically by Miss Gascoigne, and practically by Phillis, who was the cleverest and most determined woman in it, the elements of strife were always smouldering, and frequently bursting out into a flame. The one bone of contention was, as might be expected, the children—who should rule them, and whether that rule was to be one of love or fear.

Christian, though young, was neither ignorant nor inexperienced: and when day by day and week after week, she had to sit still and see that saddest of all sights to a tender heart, children slowly ruined, exasperated by injustice, embittered by punishment, made deceitful or cowardly by continual fear, her spirit wakened up to its full dignity of womanhood and motherhood.

"They are my children, and I will not have things thus," was her continual thought. But how to effect her end safely and unobnoxiously was, as it always is, the great difficulty.

She took quiet methods at first; principally the very simple one of loving the children till they

began to love her. Oliver, and by-and-by Letitia, seized every chance of escaping out of the noisy nursery, where Phillis boxed, or beat, or scolded all day long, to Mother's quiet room, where they always found a gentle word and a smile—a little rivulet from that

"Constant stream of love which knew no fall,"

which was Cowper's fondest memory of his mother, and which should be perpetually flowing out from the hearts of all mothers towards all children. These poor children had never known it till now.

Their little hearts opened to it, and bathed in it as in a fountain of joy. It washed away all their small naughtinesses, made them strong and brave, gradually lessened the underhandedness of the girl, the roughness and selfishness of the boy, and turned the child Oliver into a little angel. That is, if children ever are angels, except in poetry;—but it is certain, and Christian often shuddered to see it, that mismanagement and want of love can change them into little demons.

And at last there came a day when, passive resistance being useless, she had to strike with a strong hand; the resolute hand which, as before seen, Christian, gentle as she was, could lift up against injustice, and especially injustice shown to children.

It happened thus: One day Arthur had been

very naughty, or so his aunt Henrietta declared, when Mrs. Grey, who heard the disturbance, came to inquire into it. She thought it not such great wickedness—rather a piece of boyish mischief than intentional "insult," as Miss Gascoigne affirmed it was. The lady had lost her spectacles; Arthur had pretended deeply to sympathise, had aided in the search, and finally, after his aunt had spent several minutes of fume and fuss, and angry accusations against everybody, he had led her up to the dining-room mirror, where she saw the spectacles—calmly resting on her own nose!

"But I only meant it as a joke, mother. And oh! it was so funny!" cried Arthur between laughing and sobbing—for his ears tingled still with the sharp blow which had proved that the matter was no fun at all to Aunt Henrietta.

"It was a very rude joke, and you ought to beg your aunt's pardon immediately," said Christian gravely.

But begging pardon was not half enough salve to the wounded dignity of Miss Gascoigne. She had been personally offended—that greatest of all crimes in her eyes—and she demanded condign punishment. Nothing short of that well-known instrument which, in compliment to Arthur's riper years, Phillis had substituted for the tied-up posy of twigs chosen out of her birch broom—a

little, slender, yellow thing, which black children might once upon a time have played with, and the use of which towards white children inevitably teaches them a sense of burning humiliation, rising into fierce indignation and desire for revenge, not unlike the revenge of negro slaves. And naturally; for while chastisement makes Christians, punishment only makes brutes.

Almost brutal grew the expression of Arthur's poor thin face, when his aunt insisted on a flogging with the old familiar cane, and after the old custom, by Phillis's hands.

"Do it, and I'll kill Phillis!" was all he said, but he looked as if he could, and would.

And when Phillis appeared, not unready or unwilling to execute the sentence—for she had bitterly resented Arthur's secession from nursery rule—the boy clung desperately with both his arms round his step-mother's waist, and the shriek of "Mother, mother!" half fury, half despair, pierced Christian's very heart.

Now, Mrs. Grey had a few rather strong opinions of her own on the subject of punishment, especially corporal punishment. She thought it degraded rather than reformed, in most cases; and wherever she herself had seen it tried, it had always signally and fatally failed. At the utmost, the doubtfulness of the experiment was so great that

she felt it ought never to be administered for any but grave moral offences—theft, lying, or the like. Not certainly in such a case as the present—a childish fault, perhaps only a childish folly, where no moral harm was either done or intended.

"I didn't mean it! I didn't, mother!" cried the boy incessantly, as he clung to her for protection. And Christian held him fast.

"Miss Gascoigne, if you will consider a little, I think you will see that Arthur's punishment had better be of some other sort than flogging. We will discuss it between ourselves. Phillis, you can go."

But Phillis did not offer to stir.

"Nurse, obey my orders," screamed Miss Gascoigne. "Take that wicked boy and cane him soundly."

"Nurse," said Christian, turning very pale, and speaking in an unusually suppressed voice, "if you lay one finger on my son you quit my service immediately."

The assumption of authority was so unexpected, so complete, and yet not overstepping one inch the authority which Mrs. Grey really possessed, that both sister-in-law and servant stood petrified, and offered no resistance, until Miss Gascoigne said, quivering with passion,—

"This cannot go on. I must know at once

my rights in this house, or quit it. Phillis, knock at the study-door and say I wish to speak to Dr. Grey. That is, if Mrs. Grey, your mistress, will allow you."

"Certainly," said Christian.

And then, drawing Arthur beside her, and sitting down, for she felt shaking in every limb, she waited the event. For it was a struggle which she had long felt must come, and the sooner it came the better. There are crises when the "peace-at-any-price" doctrine becomes a weakness,—more, an absolute wrong. Much as she would have suffered, and had suffered, so long as all the suffering lay with herself alone, when it came to involve another, she saw her course was clear. As Arthur stood by her, convulsed with sobs, crying at one minute, "Mother, it's not fair, I meant no harm;" and the next, clenching his little fist with "If Phillis touches me, I'll murder Phillis;" she felt that it was no longer a question of pleasantness or ease, or even of saving her husband from pain. It became a matter of duty,—her duty to act to the best of her conscience and ability towards the children whom Providence had sent to her. It was no kindness to her husband to allow these to be sacrificed, as, if she did not stand firm, Arthur might be sacrificed, for life.

So she sat still, uttering not a word, except

an occasional whisper of "Be quiet, Arthur," until Dr. Grey entered the room. Even then she restrained herself so far as to let Miss Gascoigne tell the story. She trusted,—as she knew she could trust—to her husband's sense of justice and quick-sightedness, even through any amount of cloudy exaggeration. When the explanation came to an end, and Dr. Grey, sorely perplexed and troubled, looked towards his wife questioningly, all she said was a suggestion that both the children—for Letitia had watched the whole matter with eager curiosity from a corner—should be sent out of the room.

"Yes, yes, certainly: Arthur, let go your mother's hand, and run up to the nursery."

But Arthur's plaintive sobs began again. "I can't go, Papa:—I daren't; Phillis will beat me!"

"Is this true, Christian?"

"I am afraid it is. Had not the children better wait in my room?"

This order given, and the door closed, Dr. Grey sat down with a very piteous countenance. He was such a lover of peace and quietness; and now to be brought from his study into the middle of this domestic hurricane—it was rather hard. He looked from his wife to his sister, and back again to his wife. There his eyes rested and brightened a little. The contrast

between the two faces: one so fierce and bitter, the other sad indeed, but composed and strong. Nature herself, who in the long run, usually decides between false and true authority, showed at once who really possessed the latter; which of the two women was the most fitted to govern children.

"Henrietta," said Dr. Grey, "what is it you wish me to do? If my boy has offended you, of course he must be punished. Leave him to Mrs. Grey: she will do what is right."

"Then I have no longer any authority in this house?"

"Authority in my wife's house my sister could hardly desire. Influence she might always have; and respect and affection will, I trust, never be wanting."

Dr. Grey spoke very kindly, and held out his hand, but Miss Gascoigne threw it angrily aside. And then, breaking through even the unconscious restraint in which most women, even the most violent, are held by the presence of a man, and especially such a man as the Master, she burst out,—this poor passionate woman, cursed with that terrible predominance of self which in men is ugly enough, in women absolutely hateful.

"Never! Keep your hypocrisies to yourself, and your wife, too.—the greatest hypocrite I know.

But she cannot deceive me. Maria—" and she rushed at luckless Aunt Maria who that instant, knitting in hand, was quietly entering the room. "Come here, Maria, and be a witness to what your brother is doing. He is turning me out of his house,—me who since my poor sister died have been like a mother to his children. He is taking them from me, and giving them over to that woman,—that bad, low, cunning woman!"

"Stop!" cried Dr. Grey. "One word more like that, and I *will* turn you out of my house,—ay, this very night!"

There was a dead pause. Even Miss Gascoigne was frightened. Christian, who had never in all her life witnessed such a scene, wished she had done anything,—borne anything, rather than have given cause for it. And yet, the children! Looking at that furious woman, she felt—any observer would have felt, that to leave children in Miss Gascoigne's power, was to ruin them for life. No, what must be done had better be done now than when too late.

Yet her heart failed her at sight of poor Aunt Maria's sobs.

"Oh, dear Arnold, what is the matter? You haven't been vexing Henrietta? But you never vex anybody, you are so good. Dear Henrietta, are we really to go back to our own house at Avonside? Well, I don't mind. It is a very

pretty house, far more cheerful than the Lodge; and our tenants are just leaving, and they have kept the furniture in the best of order,—the nice furniture that dear Arnold gave us, you know. Even if he does want us to leave the Lodge, it is quite natural. I always said so. And we shall only be a mile away, and can have the children to spend long days with us, and ——"

Simple Aunt Maria, in her hasty jumping at conclusions, had effected more than she thought of,—more harm and more good.

"I assure you, Maria," said Dr. Grey, with a look of sudden relief, which he tried hard—good man!—to conceal, "it never was my intention to suggest your leaving, but since you have suggested it ——"

"I will go," interrupted Miss Gascoigne. "Say not another word, we will go. I will not stay to be insulted here; I will return to my own house—my own poor humble cottage, where at least I can live independent and at peace. Yes, Dr. Grey, I will—however you may try to prevent me."

"I do not prevent you. On the contrary, I consider it would be an excellent plan, and you have my full consent to execute it whenever you choose."

This quiet taking of her at her word,—this brief, determined, and masculine manner of set-

tling what she had no intention of doing, unless driven to it through a series of feminine arguments, contentions, and storms, was quite too much for Miss Gascoigne.

"Go back to Avonside Cottage! Shut myself up in that poor miserable hole ——"

"Oh, Henrietta!" expostulated Aunt Maria: "when it is so nicely furnished! with the pretty little greenhouse that dear Arnold built for us too."

"Don't tell me of greenhouses! I say it is only a hole. And I to settle down in it! to exile myself from Avonsbridge society, that Mrs. Grey may rule there, and boast that she has driven me out of the field,—me, the last living relative of your dear lost wife, to say nothing of poor Maria, your excellent sister, to whom you owe so much ——"

"Oh, Henrietta!" pleaded Miss Grey once more. "Never mind her, dear, dear Arnold."

Dr. Grey looked terribly hurt, but he and Aunt Maria exchanged one glance, and one long hand-clasp. Whatever debt there was between the brother and sister, love had long since cancelled it all.

"Pacify her, Maria,—you know you can. Make her think better of all this nonsense. My wife and my sisters could never be rivals; it is ridiculous to suppose such a thing. But, indeed,

I believe we should all be much better friends if you were in your own house at Avonside."

"I think so too," whispered Aunt Maria. "I have thought so ever so long."

"Then it is settled," replied Dr. Grey in the mild way in which he sometimes did settle things, after which you might just as well attempt to move him as to move the foundations of Saint Bede's.

It was all so sudden, this total domestic revolution, which yet everybody inwardly recognised as a great relief, that for a minute or two nobody found a word more to say, until Miss Gascoigne, who generally had both the first word and the last, broke out again.

"Yes, you have done it, and it shall never be undone, however you may live to repent it. Dr. Grey, I quit your house, shaking the dust off my feet: see that it does not rise up in judgment against you. Maria,—my poor Maria,—your own brother may forsake you, but I never will. We go away together,—to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow," said Dr. Grey. "Your tenants have only just left, and we must have the Cottage made comfortable for you. Let me see, his is the 8th; suppose we settle that you leave on the 30th of June. Will that do, Maria?"

As he spoke he took her little fat hand, patted it lovingly, and then kissed her.

"You'll not be unhappy, sister? You know it is only going back to the old ways, and to the old country life, which you always liked much better than this."

"Much,—much better. You are quite right, as you always are, dear Arnold."

This was said in a whisper, but Miss Gascoigne caught it.

"Ah, yes! I see what you are doing. Stealing from me the only heart that loves me. Persuading her to stay behind. Very well. Do it, Maria. Remain with your brother and your brother's wife. Forget me, who am nothing to anybody; of no use to one creature living."

Poor woman! without meaning it she had hit upon something very near the truth. It always is so; always must be. People win what they earn; those who sow the wind reap the whirlwind. Handsome, clever, showy, and admired, as she had been in her day, probably not one living soul did now really care for Henrietta Gascoigne, except foolish, faithful Aunt Maria.

And yet there must have been some good in her, something worth caring for, even to retain that affection, weak and submissive as it may have been. Christian's heart smote her as if she herself had been guilty of injustice towards Miss Gascoigne, when she saw Miss Grey creep up to her old friend, the tears flowing like a mill-stream.

"No, dear, I shall not stay behind. Arnold doesn't want me. And I have always put up with you somehow,—I mean, you have put up with me,—we shall manage to do it still. We'll live together again, as we did for so many years, in our pretty cottage and garden that dear Arnold gave us, and I will look after my poultry, and you shall do your visiting. Yes, dear Henrietta, it will be all for the best. We shall be so independent, so happy."

Happy! It was not a word in Miss Gascoigne's dictionary. But she looked with a certain tenderness at the fond little woman who had loved her, borne with her, never in the smallest degree resisted her, since they were girls together. It was a strange tie, perhaps finding its origin in something deeper than itself; in that dead captain whose old-fashioned miniature still lay in poor Maria's drawer,—the fierce, handsome face, proving that had he lived he might have been as great a tyrant over her as his sister Henrietta. Still, however it arose, the bond was there, and nothing but death could ever break it between these two lonely women.

"Come, then, Maria. We will share our last crust together. You at least have never wronged me. Come away."

Gathering her dress about her with a tragical air, and plucking it, as she passed Mrs. Grey,

as though the possible touch were pollution, Aunt Henrietta swept from the room; Aunt Maria, after one deprecatory look behind, as if to say, "You see I can't do otherwise," slowly following.

And so it was all over,—safely over,—this great change, which, however longed for, had not been contemplated as a possibility, one hour before. It had arranged itself out of the most trivial elements, as great events often do. There could be no question that everybody felt it to be the best thing, and everybody was very thankful; and yet Christian watched her husband with a little uncertainty, until she heard him heave a sigh of relief.

"Yes, I am sure it was right to be done, and I am glad it is done. Are not you, Christian?"

"Oh, so glad! I hope it is not wicked in me, but I am so glad!"

"Why? to have me all to yourself," said he, smiling at her energy.

A strange, unwonted thrill ran through Christian's heart as she recognised, beyond possibility of doubt, that this was the secret source of her delight, of the feeling as if a new existence were opening before her; as if the heavy weight which had oppressed her were taken off, and she could move through those old gloomy rooms, which had

once struck a chill through her whole being, with a sense as if she were as light as air, and as merry as a bird in the spring.

To have the Lodge made into a real home,—a home altogether her own,—and emptied of all but those who were really her own; with a glad welcome for any visitors, but still only as visitors, coming and going, and never permanently interfering with the sweet, narrow circle of the family fireside; to be really mistress in her own house; to have her time to herself; to spend long mornings with the children; long evenings alone with her husband, even if he sat for hours poring over his big books, and did not speak a word,—oh, how delicious it would be!

"Yes, all to myself,—I'll have you all to myself," she murmured, as she put her arms round his neck and looked right up into his eyes.

For the first time she was sure,—quite sure, that she loved him. And as she stood embraced, encircled and protected by his love, and thought of her peaceful life, now and to come, full of duties, blessings, and delights, ay, though it had also no lack of cares, Christian felt sorry,—oh, so infinitely sorry! for poor Aunt Henrietta.

CHAPTER XI.

Weave, weave, weave,
The tiniest thread will do;
The filmiest thread from a spider's bed,
Is stout enough for you.

Twist, twist, twist,
With fingers dainty and small;
Let the wily net be quietly set,
That the innocent may fall.

ARTHUR never got his thrashing. The serious results, of which he had been the primary cause, for a while put his naughtiness out of everybody's head; and when, after an hour or more, Christian went up-stairs, and found the poor little fellow waiting patiently and obediently in mother's bed-room, it seemed rather hard to punish him.

She went down again into the study, and had a long talk with her husband, in which she spoke

her mind very freely,—more freely than she had ever done before, and told him things which had come to her knowledge concerning the children, of which he, poor man! had hitherto been kept in total ignorance.

Thus taking counsel together, the father and mother decided that, except in very rare instances, corporal punishments should be entirely abolished, and never under any circumstances should be administered by Phillis; that Phillis's sway was to be narrowed as much as possible, without any absolute laws being made that would wound her feelings, or show indifference to her long fidelity.

"For," said Dr. Grey, "we must not forget, Christian, that she loved the children when they had not quite so much love as they have now."

No; Arthur was not thrashed; was promised faithfully that Phillis should never be allowed to thrash him any more; but his step-mother made him write the meekest, humblest letter of apology to his aunt Henrietta;—which that lady returned unanswered. This, however, as Christian took some pains to explain to him, was a matter of secondary consequence. Whatever she did, he had done only what was his duty. And he was enjoined when they did meet, to address her politely and respectfully, as a nephew and a gentleman

should—as his father always addressed her, even in answer to those sharp speeches which, though in the children's presence, Miss Gascoigne continually let fall.

Nevertheless, Dr. Grey bore them, and so did his wife, which was harder. She did not mind rudeness to herself, but to hear her husband thus spoken to, and spoken of, was a sufficient trial to make her long for the time of release. And yet, through it all, came the deep sense of pity that any woman who could show herself in so pleasant a light abroad—for many of the morning visitors quite condoled with Mrs. Grey on the impending change at the Lodge, and on the great loss she would have in her sister-in-law,—should be so obnoxious at home, that her nearest relatives counted the days until her shadow should cease to darken their doors.

And so, gradually and often painfully, but still with a firm conviction on everybody's mind that the plan so suddenly decided on had been the best for all parties, came round the time of the aunts' departure.

Christian had spent all the previous day at Avonside, which she found a very pretty cottage, all woodbine and roses, with nothing poverty-stricken about it, either within or without. She had gone over it from garret to basement, making everything as comfortable as possible,

as she had *carte blanche* from her husband to do, and gladly did. For on her tender conscience rankled every bitter word of Miss Gascoigne's as though it were real truth: and sometimes, in spite of herself, she could not suppress an uneasy feeling as if the aunts were being "turned out." The last day of their stay at the Lodge was so exceedingly painful, that, having done all she could, she at length rushed out of the house with Arthur for a breath of fresh air and a quiet half-hour before dinner, if such were possible.

She did not go far, only just crossing the bridge to the College grounds opposite, where, in sight of the Lodge windows, she could walk up and down the beautiful avenue which still bears the name of the old philosopher who loved it. If his wise, gentle ghost still haunted the place, it might well have watched with pleasure this fair, grave, sweet-looking young woman, sauntering up and down with the boy in her hand, listening vaguely to his chatter, and now and then putting in a smiling answer. She had a smiling, peaceful face, and her thoughts were peaceful too. She was thinking to herself how pretty Avonsbridge was in its June dress of freshest green, how quietly and innocently life passed under shadow of these College walls, and how could any one have the heart to make it otherwise?

She would not, after to-day. She would cease to vex herself, or let her husband vex himself about Miss Gascoigne. With a mile and a half between them, the Lodge would certainly feel safe from her. And, oh! what a wonderful peace would come into the house when she left it! How good the children would be! How happy their father!—yes! he could be made happy, Christian knew that; and it was she who could make him so. The consciousness of power in this sweet sense, and the delight of exercising it, was becoming the most exquisite happiness Christian had ever known. She sat dreaming over it, almost like a girl in her first love-dream—only this dream was deeper and calmer, with all the strength of daily duty added to the joy of loving and being loved. Not that she reasoned much—she was not given to much analysing of herself—she only knew that she was content, and found content in everything—in the ripple of the river at her feet, the flutter of the leaves over her head, the soft blue sky above the colleges, and the green grass gemmed with daisies, where an old man was mowing on the one side, and a large thrush, grown silent with summer, was hopping about on the other. Everything seemed beautiful, for the beauty began in her own heart.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey."

People talk about "looking as if they had seen a ghost,"—and perhaps that look was not unlike Christian's as she started at this salutation behind her. He must have come stealthily across the grass, for she had heard nothing, did not even know that anybody was near, till she looked up and saw Sir Edwin Uniacke.

The surprise was so great that it brought (oh, what shame to feel it, and feel sure that he saw it!) the blood up to her face,—to her very forehead. She half rose, and then sat down again, with a blind instinct that anything was better than either to be or to appear afraid.

Without waiting for either a reply or a recognition—which indeed came not, nothing but that miserable blush—the young man seated himself on the bench and began to make acquaintance with Arthur.

"I believe I have seen you before, my little friend. You are Dr. Grey's son, and I once offered to carry you, but was refused. Are you quite well now, Master Albert? Isn't that your name?"

"No; Arthur," said the boy, rather flattered at being noticed. "Are you one of the men at our college? You haven't your gown on."

"Not now," with a queer look, half amusement, half irritation. "I don't belong to Avons-

bridge. I have a house of my own in the country, —such a pretty place, with a park and deer, and a lake, and a boat to row on it. Wouldn't you like to see it?"

"Yes," said Arthur, all eyes and ears.

"I live there, but I am always coming over to Avonsbridge. Do what I will, I cannot keep away."

The tone, the glance across the child, were unmistakeable. Christian rose, her momentary stupefaction gone.

"Come, Arthur; papa will be waiting dinner. We never keep papa waiting, you know."

Simple as the words were, they expressed volumes.

For an instant her composed matron grace, her perfect indifference, silenced, nay, almost awed the young man, and then irritated him into resistance. He caught hold of Arthur in passing.

"You need not go yet. It is only just five, and your papa does not dine till six."

"How do you know?" asked the child.

"Oh, I know everything! I watch you in and out of the Lodge, and am aware of all you do.— But about the boat I promised you. It is at my place, Lake Hall, near ——?"

"Arthur, we must go."

Arthur jumped up at once. Gentle as it was,

he had learnt that that voice must never be disobeyed.

"I can't stay, sir; mother calls me. But I'll tell papa we met you, and ask him to let me come and see you, if you will tell me your name."

Sir Edwin hesitated.

"There is no necessity," said Mrs. Grey. "Arthur, I know this gentleman; I myself shall tell your papa that we have met him here. Good morning, Sir Edwin Uniacke."

She bowed, with that perfect, repellent courtesy against which there is no appeal, and passed on. Had she seen,—she did not, for she looked straight on and saw nothing,—but had she seen the look of mingled hate and love which darkened over Sir Edwin's face, it might have terrified her. But no! she was too courageous a woman to fear anything save doing wrong.

After a minute's angry beating of his boot with his stick, the young man rose and followed them down the avenue, contriving, by dint of occasional conversation with Arthur, to keep alongside of them the whole way, as far as the bridge which connected the College grounds with the College buildings, and which was overlooked by the whole frontage of the Lodge.

With a vague sense of relief and protection,

Christian glanced to the windows of her home; and there, at the open nursery casement, she saw a group, Phillis, Oliver, Letitia, and behind Letitia another person — Miss Susan Bennett, who had come with a message from old Mrs. Ferguson, and whom, in her kindness, Mrs. Grey had sent to have a cup of tea in the nursery, before returning to the village; where the girl said she was "quite comfortable." There she stood, she and Phillis, watching, as they doubtless had watched, the whole interview, from the time Sir Edwin sat down on the bench, till his parting shake of the hand to Arthur, and farewell bow to herself, which bow was rather easy and familiar than distantly ceremonious.

Had he done it on purpose? Had he too seen the group at the window, and, moved by a contemptible vanity, or worse, behaved so that these others might notice his manner to Mrs. Grey and put upon it any construction they pleased?

Yet what possible construction could be put upon it, even by the most ill-natured and malicious witnesses? The College grounds were free to all; this meeting was evidently accidental; and all that had passed thereat was a few words with the boy, which Arthur would be sure to repeat at once; nor did Christian desire to prevent him.

It was a hard position. She had done no wrong,—not the shadow of wrong,—and yet here was she, Christian Grey, discovered meeting and walking with a man whom her husband had distinctly forbidden the house. Discovered both by her servant, who, having an old servant's love of prying into family affairs, no doubt knew of this prohibition; and by Miss Bennett, to whom she herself had said that Sir Edwin was a man unfit for any respectable woman's acquaintance.

What would they both think? And, moreover, when she heard of it—as assuredly she would—what would Miss Gascoigne think, and say?

That overpowering dread, "What will people say?" for the first time in her life began to creep over Christian's fearless heart. Such an innocent heart it was; and oh! such a contented one, only half-an-hour ago.

"How dare he?" she said, fiercely, as she found herself alone in her own room, with but just time enough to dress and take her place as the fair, stately, high-thoughted, pure-hearted mistress of her husband's table. "How dare he?" and standing at the glass she looked, almost with disgust, into the beautiful face that burnt hotly still, only at the remembrance of the last ten minutes. "But he must see,—he must surely understand how utterly I despise him. He will not pre-

sume again. Oh, if I had only told my husband! It was a terrible mistake!"

What was—her secret, or her marriage? Or both?

Christian did not stop to think. Whatever it was, she knew that, like most of the mistakes and miseries of this world, it was made to be remedied,—made possible of remedy. At all events, the pain must be endured, fought through, struggled with, anything but succumbed to.

In the five minutes that after all she found she had to wait in the drawing-room before the aunts or her husband appeared, Christian took herself seriously to task for this overwhelming, cowardly fear. What had she really to dread? What harm could he do her,—the bad man of whom she had so ignorantly made a girl's ideal? The only testimony thereof was her letters, if he still had them in his possession,—her poor innocent girlish letters,—very few, just two or three. Foolish they might have been, sentimental and ridiculous, but she could not remember anything wrong in them,—anything that a girl in her teens need blush to have written, either to friend or lover; save for the one fact that a girl is wiser to have no friend at all among men—except her lover. And, whatever they were, most likely he had destroyed them long ago.

"No, no!" she thought: "he cannot do me any harm; he dare not!"

It was difficult to say what Sir Edwin Uniacke would not dare. For going back to her room for some trifle forgotten, she discovered that he was still lounging, cigar in mouth, up and down the river-side avenue opposite, where he could plainly see, and be seen from, almost every window in the Lodge.

And there, hurrying to meet him, she saw Susan Bennett. But the meeting appeared not satisfactory, and after a few minutes the girl had left him, and he was again seen walking up and down alone.

A vain woman might have been flattered, perhaps allured, by this persistence. In Christian it produced only repulsion, actual hatred; if so gentle a spirit could hate. An honest love, from the very humblest man alive, she would have been tender over; but this, which to her, a wife, was necessarily utter insult and wickedness, awoke in her nothing but abhorrence,—the same sort of righteous abhorrence that she would have felt—she knew she would—towards any woman who had tried to win her husband from herself. Win her husband? The fancy almost made her smile, and then filled her with a brimming sense of joy that he was—what he was, a man to

whom the bare idea of loving any woman but his own wife was so impossible that it became actually ludicrous.

She smiled, she even laughed, with an ever-growing sense of all he was to her and she to him, when she heard him open his study-door and call "Christian."

She went quickly to explain in a word or two before they went down to dinner, her rencontre with Sir Edwin Uniacke. Afterwards, in their long, quiet evenings, to which she so looked forward, she would tell her husband the whole story, and give herself the comfort of feeling that now at last he was fully acquainted with her whole outer life and inmost soul, as a husband ought to be.

But there stood the two aunts, one stately and grim, the other silent and tearful; and it took all Dr. Grey's winning ways to smoothe matters, so as to make their last meal together before the separation, anything like a peaceful one.

He seemed so anxious for this,—nervously anxious,—that his wife forgot everything in helping him to put a cheerful face on everything. And when she watched him, finding a pleasant word for every one, and patient even with Miss Gascoigne, who to-day seemed in her sharpest

mood,—grey-haired, quaint, and bookish-looking as he was, it appeared to Christian that not a young man living could bear a moment's comparison with Dr. Arnold Grey.

He tried his best, and she tried her best; but it was rather a dull dinner, and she found no opportunity to say, as at last she had decided to say, publicly, just as a piece of news, no more —that she had to-day met Sir Edwin Uniacke. And so it befell that the first who told the fact was Arthur, blurting out between his strawberries—

"Oh, papa! I want you to let me go to a place called Lake Hall."

"Lake Hall!"

"Yes; the owner of it invited me there: he did, indeed. He is the kindest, pleasantest gentleman I ever met. A 'Sir,' too! His name is Sir Edwin Uniacke."

"My boy, where did you meet Sir Edwin Uniacke?"

So the whole story came out. Dr. Grey listened in grave silence,—even a little displeasure, or something less like displeasure than pain. At length he said:—

"I think you must have made some mistake, Arthur. Your mother could never have allowed ——"

"She did not say she would allow me to go. She looked rather vexed; I don't think she liked Sir Edwin Uniacke. And if she is very much against my going,—well,—I won't go," said Arthur, heroically.

"You are a good boy; but I think this gentleman ought to have hesitated a little before he thus intruded himself upon my wife and my son."

"I think so, too," said Christian, the first words she had spoken.

Dr. Grey glanced at her sharply, but the most suspicious husband could have read nothing in her face beyond what she said.

"And I think," burst in Miss Gascoigne, who had listened to it all, her large eyes growing every minute larger and larger, "that it must be somehow a lady's own fault when a gentleman is intrusive. I never believed,—I never could have believed,—after all Dr. Grey has said about Sir Edwin, that the three figures, a lady, and gentleman, and a child, whom I saw this afternoon sitting so comfortably together on the bench,—as comfortably, I vow and declare, as if they had been sitting there an hour, which perhaps they had ——"

"Not more than two minutes," interrupted Christian, speaking very quietly, but conscious of a wild desire to fly at Miss Gascoigne and shake

her as she stood,—putting forward, in her customary way, those mangled fragments of truth which are more irritating than absolute lies. "Indeed, it was only two minutes. I did not choose, even if I had no other reason, that a man of whom Dr. Grey did not approve, should hold any communication with Arthur."

"Thank you, that was right," said Dr. Grey.

"Yet you let him walk with you,—I know you did, up to the very Lodge door."

"To the bridge, Miss Gascoigne."

"Well, it's all the same. And I must confess it is most extraordinary conduct. To refuse a gentleman's visits,—his open visits here,—on the pretext that he is not good enough for your society, and then meet him, sit with him, walk with him in the College grounds. What will people say?"

Christian turned like a hunted creature at bay. "I do not care—not a jot—what people say!"

"I thought not. People like you never do care. They fly in the face of society; they ——"

"Husband!" with a sort of wild appeal, the first she had ever made, for protection,—for at least justice.

Dr. Grey looked up, startled out of a long fit

of thoughtfulness,—sadness it might be; during which he had let the conversation pass him by.

"The only thing I care for is what my husband thinks. If he blames me —— "

"What for, my dear?"

"Because when I was walking in the College grounds, as any lady may walk, that man, Sir Edwin Uniacke, whose acquaintance I desire as little as you do, came up and spoke to me, or rather to Arthur. I could not help it, could I?"

"No, my child." With a slight emphasis on the words "my child," that went to Christian's heart. Yes, surely, if she had only had courage to tell him, in his large tenderness he could have understood that childish folly, the dream of a day, and the long misery it had brought her. She would tell him all, the very first opportunity; however much it pained and humiliated her, she would tell her good husband all.

"And, papa, have I been naughty too?" said Arthur. "I am sure I did not see anything so very dreadful in Sir Edwin. He came up and spoke to mother as if he knew her quite well, and then he talked ever so much to me, and said if I would visit him he would give me a boat to row, and a horse to ride. And I'm sure he seemed the very kindest, pleasantest gentleman."

"So he is. And nothing shall ever make *me* believe he isn't," cried Miss Gascoigne, always delighted to pull against the tide. "And I must say, Dr. Grey, the way you and your wife set up your opinion against that of really good society, is perfect nonsense. For my part, when I have a house of my own once more and can invite whomsoever I please ——"

"I would nevertheless advise, so far as a brother may," interrupted Dr. Grey, very seriously, "that you do not invite Sir Edwin Uniacke. And now, aunts both," with that sunshiny smile which could disperse almost any domestic cloud, "as this conversation is not particularly interesting to the children, suppose we end it. When do you intend to have us all to tea at Avonside?"

CHAPTER XII.

Forgive us each his daily sins,
  If few or many, great or small;
And those that sin against us, Lord,
  Good Lord! forgive them all.

Judge us not as we others judge;
  Condemn us not as we condemn;
They who are merciless to us—
  Be merciful to them.

And if the cruel storm should pass,
  And let Thy heaven of peace appear;
Make not our right the right—or might,
  But make *the* right shine clear.

"WELL, the least I can say of it is, that it's very extraordinary!"

"What is extraordinary?" asked Miss Grey, looking up placidly from her knitting, which did not get on very fast now.

For Aunt Maria was exceedingly busy, and exceedingly happy. If ever her brother or his

wife had the least qualms of conscience about her removal from the Lodge to Avonside, they would have been dispelled by the sight of the dear little fat woman trotting about, the picture of content; full of housekeeping plans, and schemes for her poultry-yard, her pigeon-house, and her green-house. As for her garden, it was a source of perpetual pride, wonder, and delight. The three years she had spent at the Lodge—which, in her secret heart, she owned were rather dull and trying years—were ended. She herself, and indeed the whole establishment, resumed again exactly the place they had filled in the lifetime of the first Mrs. Grey. Avonside became once more a regular aunts' house—devoted to children who now, at the distance of a mile and a half, thought nothing so delightful as to spend long days there, and be petted by Aunt Maria.

The sudden revolution had succeeded — as honest revolutions usually do, when any one has the courage to attempt them — to break through a false domestic position, and supply it with a true one. Even Miss Gascoigne was the happier for it; less worried in her mind, having no feeling of domestic responsibility, and being no longer haunted by the children. The poor little souls! she could get on well enough with them for an hour or two at Avonside, but they had been a

sore affliction to her at the Lodge. Any woman, who cannot wholly set aside self, is sure to be tormented by, and be a still worse torment to, children.

No; much as she pitied herself, and condoled with Aunt Maria every hour in the day, Aunt Henrietta was a great deal better in every way, since she came to Avonside: less cross, less ill-natured, even her perpetual mill-stream of talk flowed on without such violent outbreaks of wrath against the whole world, as had embittered the atmosphere of the Lodge. Now, though her answer was sharp, it was not so sharp as it might have been — would certainly have been —a few weeks before.

"Maria, I don't think you ever do listen to me when I'm talking. I am afraid all I say goes in at one ear and out at the other."

Which was not impossible, perhaps not unfortunate; otherwise, since Miss Gascoigne talked pretty nearly all day long, Miss Grey's whole life might have been spent in listening. She replied, with a meek smile, "Oh, no, dear Henrietta!"

"Then you surely would have made some observation on what I have been telling you; this very extraordinary thing which Miss Smiles told me last night at the Lodge, while Mrs.

Grey was singing—as I forewarned you, Mrs. Grey sings everywhere now—and her husband lets her do it,—likes it, too!—he actually told me it was a pleasure to him that his wife should make herself agreeable to other people. They mean to give tea-parties once a week, to the undergraduates of Saint Bede's—because she says the Master ought to be like a father over them, invite them and make his house pleasant to them. Such a thing was never heard of in our days."

"No: but I dare say dear Arnold knows best. And what about Miss Smiles?"

"I've told you twenty times already, Maria, how Miss Smiles said, that Mrs. Brereton said—you know Mrs. Brereton, who has so many children, and never can keep a governess long—that her new governess, who happens to be Miss Susan Bennett, whom, you may remember, I once got for Letitia—told her a long story about Mrs. Grey and Sir Edwin Uniacke; how he was an old acquaintance of hers before she was married."

"Of Christian's? She never said so. Oh, no! it can't be, or she would have said so."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Aunt Henrietta, mysteriously.

"Besides, she dislikes him. You know, Henrietta, that when he called here last week, and

she happened to be with us, she put on her bonnet and went home immediately without seeing him."

"And a very rude thing, too, on her part. Any visitors whom I choose to invite to my house ——"

"But he invited himself."

"No matter, he came; and I certainly had no reason to turn him out. I consider Dr. Grey's objections to him perfectly ridiculous. Why, one meets the young man everywhere, in the very best society, and his manners are charming. But that is not the question. The question is just this:—Was he, or was he not, an acquaintance of Mrs. Grey's before her marriage? and if he were, why did she not say so?"

"Perhaps she did."

"Not to me; when he called at the Lodge and I introduced them, they bowed as if they were just ordinary strangers. Now, that was a rather odd thing, and a very disrespectful thing to myself,—not to tell me they had met before. I certainly have a right to be displeased. Don't you feel it so, Maria?"

Whether she did or not, Maria only answered with her usual deprecatory smile.

"There is another curious circumstance, now I recall it. Sir Edwin showed great surprise,—which, indeed, I could scarcely wonder at, when I

told him,—(I forget how it happened, but I know I was somehow obliged to tell him)—who it was your brother had married, Miss Oakley, the organist's daughter."

"Don't you think," said Aunt Maria, with a sudden sparkle of intelligence, "it might have been her father he was acquainted with? Sir Edwin is so very musical himself that it is not unlikely he should seek the company of musicians. As for Christian,"—simple as she was, Aunt Maria had not lived fifty years in the world, and twenty with Miss Gascoigne, without some small acuteness,—"I can see, of course, how very bad it would have been for poor Christian to have any acquaintance among young gownsmen, and especially with a person like Sir Edwin Uniacke."

"He is no worse than his neighbours, and I beg you will make no remarks upon him," said Miss Gascoigne, with dignity. "As to Mrs. Grey——"

"Perhaps," again suggested Aunt Maria, appealingly,—"perhaps it isn't true. People do say such untrue things. Mrs. Brereton may have imagined it all."

"It was no imagination. Haven't I told you that Miss Bennett gave the whole story with full particulars? exactly as she had learnt it lately from the servant at the farm where Mr. Oakley and his daughter once lodged, and where Mr.

Uniacke used to come regularly. Not one day did he miss during a whole month. Now, Maria, I should be sorry to think ill of her, for your brother's sake, but you must allow, when a young person in her station receives constant visits from young gentlemen,—gentlemen so much above her as Sir Edwin is—it looks very like——"

"Oh, Henrietta," cried Miss Grey, the womanly feeling within her forcing its way, even through her placid non-resistance, "do stop! you surely don't consider what you are saying?"

"I am not in the habit of speaking without consideration, and I am, I assure you, perfectly aware what I am saying. I say again that such conduct was not creditable to Miss Oakley. Of course, one could not expect from a person like her the same decorum that was natural to you and me in our girlhood. I do not believe you and William ever so much as looked at one another before you were engaged."

A faint light, half tearful, half tender, gleamed in those poor, faded blue eyes. "Never mind that now, Henrietta. Consider Christian. It will be a terrible thing if any ill-natured stories go about concerning poor, dear Christian."

"It will, and therefore I am determined, for your brother's sake, to sift the story to the very bottom. In fact, I think—to end all doubt—

I shall put the direct question myself to Sir Edwin Uniacke."

Speak of the —— But it would not be fair to quote the familiar proverb against the young man who appeared that instant standing at the wicket-gate.

"Well, I never knew such a coincidence," cried Miss Grey.

"Such a providence rather," cried Miss Gascoigne. And, perhaps, in her strange obliquity of vision, or, rather, in that sad preponderance of self which darkened all her vision, like a moral cataract in the eye of her soul, this woman did actually think Providence was leading her towards a solemn duty in the investigating of the past history of the forlorn girl whom Dr. Grey had taken as his wife.

"Speak of an angel and you see his wings," said she with exceeding politeness. "We were just talking about you, Sir Edwin."

"Thank you. And for your charming parody on the old proverb likewise. I hope I am not the angel of darkness, anyhow."

He did not look like it—this graceful, handsome young man, gifted with that peculiar sort of beauty which you see in Goethe's face, in Byron's, indicating what may be called the Greek temperament,—the nature of the old Attic race—sensu-

ous, not sensual; pleasure-loving, passionate, and changeable: not intentionally vicious, but revelling in a sort of glorious enjoyment, intellectual and corporeal, to which everything else is sacrificed. In short, the heathen, as opposed to the Christian type of manhood. A type, the fascination of which lasts as long as the body lasts, and the intellect;—when these both fail, and there is left to the man only that something which we call the soul, the immortal essence, one with Divinity, and satisfied with nothing less than the divine—alas for him!

A keen observer, who had lived twenty years longer in the world than he, might, regarding him in all his beauty and youth, feel a sentiment not unlike compassion for Edwin Uniacke.

He sat down, making himself quite at home, though this was only his second visit to Avonside Cottage. But Miss Gascoigne, if only from love of opposition, had made it pretty clear to him that he was welcome there, and that she liked him. He enjoyed being liked, and had the easy confidence of one who is well used to it.

"Yes, I am ready to avouch, this is the prettiest little paradise within miles of Avonsbridge. No wonder you should have plenty of visitors. I met a tribe coming here—your sister-in-law (charming person is Mrs Grey!), your

nephews and niece, and that gipsy-looking, rather handsome nurse—who is a little like the head of Clytie, only for her sullen, underlying mouth and projecting chin."

"How you notice faces, Sir Edwin!"

"Of course. I am a little bit of an artist."

"And a great piece of a musician, as I understand. Which reminds me," added Miss Gascoigne, eager to plunge into her mission, which, in her strange delusion, she earnestly believed was a worthy and righteous one, in which she had embarked for the family benefit—"I wanted to ask whether you did not know Mrs. Grey's father, the organist? And herself, too, when she was Miss Oakley?"

"Everybody knew Mr. Oakley," was the evasive answer. "He was a remarkable man—quite a genius, with all the faults of a genius. He drank, he ate opium, he ——"

"Nay, he is dead," faintly said Aunt Maria.

"Which, you mean, is a good reason why I should speak no more about him. I obey you, Miss Grey."

"But his daughter? Did you say you knew his daughter?" pursued Miss Gascoigne.

"Oh, yes, casually. A charming girl she was! very pretty, though immature. Those large, fair women sometimes do not look their best until near

thirty. And she had a glorious voice. She and I used to sing duets together continually."

He might not have thought what he was doing,—it is but charity to suppose so; that he spoke only after his usual careless and somewhat presumptuous style of speaking about all women, but he must have been struck by the horrified expression of Miss Gascoigne's face.

"Sing duets together! a young man in your position, and a young woman in hers! Without a mother, too!"

"Oh, her father was generally present, if you think of propriety. But I do assure you, Miss Gascoigne, there was not the slightest want of propriety. She was a very pretty girl, and I was a young fellow, rather soft, perhaps, and so we had a—well, you might call it a trifling flirtation. But nothing of any consequence. Nothing, I do assure you."

"Of course, it was of no consequence," said Aunt Maria, again breaking in with a desperate courage. And still more desperate were the nods and winks with which she at last aroused even Aunt Henrietta to a sense of the position into which the conversation was bringing them both, so that she, too, had the good feeling to add,—

"Certainly, it is not of the slightest consequence. Dr. Grey is probably aware of it all."

"Which may be the reason I am never invited to the Lodge," laughed the young man, so pleasantly that one would hardly have paused to consider what he laughed at or what it implied. "By-the-by, I hear they had such a pleasant gathering there last night—a musical evening, where everybody sang a great deal and Mrs. Grey only once, but then, of course, divinely. I should like to hear her again. But look, there are the children. Shall I take the liberty of unfastening for them the latch of your garden gate?"

He sprang out of the low window, and came back, heading the small battalion of visitors—Phillis, Arthur, Letitia, and Oliver. But Mrs. Grey was not there. She had come half-way, and returned home alone.

"Well, I must say that is very odd, considering I invited her to spend the day, and, I think, rather disrespectful to me,—to us both, Maria."

"She might have been tired, after the party last night," put in Aunt Maria.

"No, she wasn't tired, for she never told me so," said Arthur. "She told me to say—not you, Phillis, mother always trusts *me* with her messages—that she had gone back on account of papa's wanting her, and that if he came to fetch us, she would come here with him in the evening."

"Very devoted! 'An old man's darling and

a young man's slave,' runs the proverb, but Mrs. Grey seems to reverse it. She will soon never stir out an inch without your brother, Maria."

"And I am sure my brother never looks so happy as when she is beside him," said Aunt Maria. "We shall quite enjoy seeing them both together to-night."

"And I only wish it had been my good fortune to join such a pleasant family party," observed Sir Edwin Uniacke.

It was rather too broad a hint, presuming even upon Miss Gascoigne's large courtesy. In dignified silence she passed it over, sending the children and Phillis away to their early dinner, and after an interval of that lively conversation, in which under no circumstances did Sir Edwin ever fail, allowing him also to depart.

As he went down the garden, Miss Grey, with great dismay, watched him stop at her beautiful jessamine bower, pull half-a-dozen of the white stars, smell at them, and throw them away. He would have done the same—perhaps had done it—with far diviner things than jessamine flowers.

"Yes," said Miss Gascoigne, looking after him, and then sitting down opposite Miss Grey, spreading out her wide silk skirts, and preparing herself solemnly for a wordy war—that is, if it

could be called a war which was all on one side. "Yes, I have come to the bottom of it all. I knew I should. Nothing ever escapes me. And pray, Maria, what do you think of her now?"

"Think of whom?"

"You are so dull when you won't hear. Of your sister-in-law, Christian Grey?"

Poor Aunt Maria looked up with a helpless pretence of ignorance. "What about her, Henrietta dear?"

"Pshaw! You know as well as I do. Only you are so obtuse, or so meek." (A mercy she was, or she would never have lived a week, not to say twenty years, with Henrietta Gascoigne.)—"Once for all, tell me what you propose doing?"

"Doing? I!"

"Yes, you. Can't you see, my dear Maria, that it is your business to inform your brother what you have discovered concerning his wife?"

"Discovered?"

"Certainly; it is a discovery, since she has never told it. Never told her husband that before her marriage she had been in the habit of singing duets, (love-songs, no doubt, most improper for any young woman) with a young gentleman of Sir Edwin's birth and position; who, of course, never thought of marrying her—(your brother, I do believe is the only man in

Avonsbridge who would have so committed himself)—and who, by the light way he speaks of her, evidently shows how little respect he had for her."

"Perhaps," mildly suggested Aunt Maria, "perhaps she really has told dear Arnold."

"Then why did he not tell us?—tell me! Why did he place me in the very awkward position of not knowing of this previous acquaintance of his wife's? Why, in that very unpleasant conversation we had one day at the Lodge, was I the only person to be kept in ignorance of his reasons —and very good reasons I now see they were— for forbidding Sir Edwin's visits? Singing duets together! Who knows but that they may meet and sing them still? That new piano! and we turned out of the house directly afterwards—literally turned out! But, perhaps, that was the very reason she did it—that she might meet him the more freely. Oh, Maria! your poor deluded brother!"

It is strange the way some women have,—men too, but especially women,—of rolling and rolling their small snowball of wrath until it grows to an actual mountain, which has had dragged into it all sorts of heterogeneous wrongs, and has grown harder and blacker day by day, till no sun of loving-kindness will ever thaw it more. In vain

did poor Maria ejaculate her pathetic "Oh, Henrietta!" and try in her feeble way to put in a kindly word or two: nothing availed. Miss Gascoigne had lashed herself up into believing firmly everything she had imagined; and it was with an honest expression of real grief and pain, that she repeated over and over again, "What ought we to do? Your poor, dear brother!"

For, with all her faults, Miss Gascoigne was a conscientious woman: one who, so far as she saw her duty, tried to fulfil it, and as strongly, perhaps a little more so, insisted on other people's fulfilling theirs. She stood aghast at the picture, her own self-painted picture, of the kind brother-in-law, of whom in her heart she was really fond; married to a false, wicked woman, more than twenty years his junior, who mocked at his age and peculiarities, and flirted behind his back with anybody and everybody. To do Aunt Henrietta justice, however, of more than flirtation she did not suspect—no person with common sense and ordinary observation could suspect—Christian Grey.

"I must speak to her myself, poor thing! I must open her eyes to the danger she is running. Only consider, Maria, if that story did go about Avonsbridge! She would never be thought well of in society again. I must speak to her. If she will only confide in me, impli-

citly, so that I can take her part, and assure everybody I meet that, however bad appearances may be, as regards this unlucky story, there is really nothing in it—nothing at all. Don't you see, Maria?"

Alas! Maria had been so long accustomed to look at everything through the vision of dear Henrietta, that she had no clear sight of her own whatever. She only found courage to say, in a feeble way:—

"Take care, oh, do take care! I know you are much cleverer than I am, and can manage things far better; but, oh! please take care."

And when some hours after, Dr. and Mrs. Grey not appearing, she was called into Miss Gascoigne's room, where that lady stood tying her bonnet-strings with a determined air, and expressing her intention of going at once to the Lodge, however inconvenient; still, all that Aunt Maria ventured to plead was that melancholy warning, generally unheeded by those who delight in playing with hot coals and edged tools, as Aunt Henrietta had done all her life, "Take care!"

In her walk to the Lodge, through the still sweet autumn evening, with a fairy-like wreath of mist rising up above the low-lying meadows of the Avon, and climbing slowly up to the

College towers, and the far-off sunset clouds, whose beauty she never noticed—Miss Gascoigne condescended to some passing conversation with Phillis, and elicited from her,—without betraying anything, as she thought,—a good deal. Namely, that Sir Edwin Uniacke was often seen walking up and down the Avenue, facing the Lodge; and that once or twice he had met and spoken to the children.

"But Mrs. Grey doesn't like it. I think she wants to drop his acquaintance," said the sharp Phillis, who was gaining quite as much information as she bestowed.

"Why, did they ever—did she ever—" and then some lingering spark of womanly feeling, womanly prudence, made Miss Gascoigne hesitate, and add with dignity, "Yes, very likely Mrs. Grey may not choose his acquaintance. He is not approved of by everybody."

"I know that," said Phillis, meaningly.

The two women, the lady and the servant, exchanged looks. Both were acute persons, and the judgment either passed on the other was keen and accurate. Probably neither judged herself, or recognised the true root of her judgment upon the third person, unfortunate Christian. "She has interfered with my management and stolen the hearts of my children," "She has

annoyed me and resisted my authority," would never have been given by either nurse or aunt as a reason for either their feelings or their actions—yet so it was.

Nevertheless, when in the hall of the Lodge they came suddenly face to face with Mrs. Grey, entering, hat in hand, from the door of the private garden, the only place where she ever walked alone now, they both started as if they had been detected in something wrong. She looked so quiet and gentle, grave and sweet, modest as a girl and dignified as a young matron; so perfectly unconscious of all that was being said or planned against her, that if these two malicious women had a conscience,—and they had, both of them,—they must have felt it smite them now.

"Miss Gascoigne, how kind of you to walk home with the children! Papa and I would have come, but he was obliged to dine in Hall. He will soon be free now, and will walk back with you. Pray come in and rest; you look tired."

Mrs. Grey's words and manner, so perfectly guileless and natural, for the moment quite confounded her enemy. Her enemy, and yet an honest enemy. Of the number of cruel things that are done in this world, how many are done absolutely for conscience sake, by people who

deceive themselves that they are acting from the noblest, purest motives; carrying out all the Christian virtues, in short, only they do so, not in themselves, but against other people. And from their list of commandments they obliterate one,—"Judge not, that ye be not judged; condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned."

But, for the time being, Miss Gascoigne was puzzled. Her stern reproof, her patronising pity, were alike disarmed. Her mountain seemed crumbling to its original mole-hill. The heap of accusing evidence which she had accumulated, dwindled into the most ordinary and commonplace facts, at sight of Christian's innocent face and placid mien. Nothing could be more unlike a woman who had ever contemplated even the ordinary "flirting" of society. As for anything worse, the idea was impossible to be entertained for a moment. It was simply ridiculous.

Aunt Henrietta sat a good while talking, quite mildly for her, of ordinary topics, before she attempted to broach the real object of her visit. It was only as the hour neared for Dr. Grey's coming in that she nerved herself to her mission. She had an uneasy sense that it would be carried out better in his absence than in his presence.

Without glancing often at Christian, who sat

so peaceful, looking out into the fading twilight, she launched her thunder-bolt at once.

"We had a visit to-day, from Sir Edwin Uniacke."

"So I supposed, since I and the children met him on the way to Avonside."

In this world, so full of shams, how utterly bewildering sometimes is the direct innocent truth! At this answer of Christian's Miss Gascoigne looked more amazed than if she had been told a dozen lies.

"Was that the reason you turned back and went home?"

"Partly; I really had forgotten something which Dr. Grey wanted; but I also wished to avoid meeting your visitor."

"Why so?"

"Surely you must guess? How can I voluntarily meet any one who is not a friend of my husband's?"

"Not though he may have been a friend of your own? For, as I understand, you once had a very close acquaintance with Sir Edwin Uniacke."

The thrust was so unexpected, so unmistakeable in its meaning, that Christian, in her startled surprise, said the very worst thing she could have said to the malicious ears which were held open

to everything and eager to miscontrue everything, "Who told you that?"

"Told me! Why all Avonsbridge is talking about it, and about you."

This was a lie,—a little white lie; one of those small exaggerations of which people make no account, but Christian believed it, and it seemed to wrap her round as with a cold mist of fear. All Avonsbridge talking of her—her, Dr. Grey's wife, who had his honour as well as her own in her keeping—talking about herself and Sir Edwin Uniacke. What? how much? how had the tale come about? how could it be met?

With a sudden instinct of self-preservation, she forcibly summoned back her composure. She knew with whom she had to deal. She must guard every look, every word.

"Will you tell me, Miss Gascoigne, exactly who is talking about me, and what they say? I am sure I have never given occasion for it."

"Never? Are you quite certain of that?"

"Quite certain. Who said I had 'a very close acquaintance'—were not these your words—with Sir Edwin Uniacke?"

"Himself."

"Himself!"

Then Christian recognised the whole amount of her difficulty,—nay, her danger. For she was

in the power, not of a gentleman, but of a villain. Any man must have been such who, under the circumstances, could have boasted of their former acquaintance, or even referred to it at all.

"Kiss and tell!" runs the disdainful proverb. And even the worldliest of men, in their low code of honour, count the thing base and ignoble. Alas, all women do not!

In the strangely mistaken code of feminine "honourableness," it is deemed no disgrace for a woman to chatter and boast of a man's love, but the utmost disgrace for her to own or feel on her side any love at all. But Christian was unlike her sex in some things. To her, with her creed of love, it would have appeared far less mean, less cowardly, less dishonourable, openly to confess, "I loved this man," than to betray "This man loved me." And it was with almost contemptuous indignation that she repeated, "What! he told it himself?"

"He did. I first heard it through Miss Bennett, your *protégée*, who has come back, and is now a governess at Mrs. Brereton's. But when I questioned Sir Edwin himself, he did not deny it."

"You questioned him?"

"Certainly. I felt it to be my duty. He says that he knew you in your father's lifetime;

that he was intimate with you both; that you and he used to sing duets together; in short, that——"

"Go on. I wish to hear it all."

"That is all. And I am sure, Mrs. Grey, it is enough."

"It is enough. And he has been saying this, and you have been listening to it, perhaps repeating it to all Avonsbridge. What a wicked woman you must be!"

The words were said, not fiercely or resentfully, but in a sort of meditative, passive despair. A sense of the wickedness, the cruelty, there was in the world, the hopelessness of struggling against it, of disentangling fact from falsehood, of silencing malice and disarming envy, came upon Christian in a fit of bitterness uncontrollable. She felt as if she could cry out, like David, "The waters have overwhelmed me, the deep waters have gone over my soul."

Even if she were not blameless,—who is blameless in this mortal life?—even if she had made a mistake—a great mistake—her punishment was sharp. Just now, when happiness was dawning upon her, when the remorse for her hasty marriage and lack of love towards her husband had died away, when her heart was beginning to leap at

the sound of his step, and her whole soul to sun itself in the tender light of his loving eyes, —it was very, very hard!

"Well, Mrs. Grey, and what have you to say for yourself?"

Christian looked up, instinctively,—lifted her passive hands, and folded them on her lap, but answered nothing.

"You must see," continued Miss Gascoigne, "what an exceedingly unpleasant story it is, and how necessary it was for me to speak about it. Such a matter easily might become the whole town's talk. An acquaintance before your marriage, which you kept so scrupulously concealed that your nearest connexions—I myself even—had not the slightest idea of it! You must perceive, Mrs. Grey, what conclusions people will draw —indeed, cannot help drawing. Not that *I* believe—I assure you I don't—one word against you. Only confide in me, and I will make the matter clear to all Avonsbridge. You hear me?"

"Yes."

"And now, my dear,"—the energy of her protection making Aunt Henrietta actually affectionate—"do speak out. Tell me all you have to say for yourself."

"Nothing."

"Nothing? What do you mean?"

It may seem an odd thing to assert, and a more difficult thing still to prove, but Miss Gascoigne was not at heart a bad woman. She had a fierce temper and an enormous egotism, yet these two qualities, in the strangely composite characters that one meets with in life, are not incompatible with many good qualities.

Pain, most sincere and undisguised, not unmingled with actual pity, was visible in Miss Gascoigne's countenance as she looked on the young creature before her, to whom her words had caused such violent emotion. For this emotion her narrow nature—always so ready to look on human nature in its worst side, and to suspect wherever suspicion could alight—found but one interpretation—guilt.

She drew back, terrified at what her interference had done. What if the story should prove to be, not mere idle gossip, but actual scandal; the sort of scandal which would cast a slur for ever on the whole Grey family, herself included?

There, above all, the fear struck home. Suppose she had meddled in a matter which no lady could touch without indecorum, perhaps actual defilement? Suppose, in answer to her entreaty, Christian should confide to her something which no lady ought to hear? What a fearful position

for her—Miss Gascoigne—to be placed in! What should she say to Dr. Grey?

Hard as her heart might be, this thought touched the one soft place in it. Her voice actually trembled as she said,—

"Your poor husband! What will become of him?"

Christian sprang up with a shrill cry. "Yes, yes! I know what I will do. I will go and tell my husband."

Miss Gascoigne thought she was mad. And, indeed, there was something almost frenzied in the way her victim rushed from the room, like a creature driven desperate by misery.

Aunt Henrietta did not know how to act. To follow Christian was quite beneath her dignity; to go home, with her mission unfulfilled, her duty undone, that too was impossible. She determined to wait a few minutes, and let things take their chance.

Miss Gascoigne was not a bad woman, only an utterly mistaken and misguided one. She meant no harm—very few people do deliberately mean harm—they only do it. She had set herself against her brother-in-law's marriage—not in the abstract, she was scarcely so wicked and foolish as that; but against his marrying this particular woman. Partly because Christian was only a governess,

with somewhat painful antecedents, one who could neither add money, rank, nor position to Dr. Grey and his family, but chiefly because it had wounded her self-love that she, Miss Gascoigne, had not been consulted, and had had no hand in bringing about the marriage.

Therefore she had determined to see it, and all concerning it, in the very worst light; to modify nothing, to excuse nothing. She had made up her mind that things were to be so and so, and so and so they must of necessity turn out. *Audi alteram partem* was an idea that never occurred, never had occurred in all her life, to Henrietta Gascoigne. In fact, she would never have believed there could be "another side," since she herself was not able to behold it.

Yet she had not a cruel nature, and the misery she endured during the few minutes that she sat thinking of the blow that was about to fall on Dr. Grey and his family,—heaping on the picture every exaggerated imagination of a mind always prone to paint things in violent colours, was enough to atone for half the wrong she had done.

She started up like a guilty creature when the door opened, and Phillis entered with a letter in her hand.

"Beg pardon, ma'am. I thought you were Mrs. Grey."

"She is just gone up-stairs,—will be back directly," said Miss Gascoigne, anxious to keep up appearances to the last available moment. "Is that letter for her? Shall I give it to her?"

"No thank you, I'll give it myself; and it'll be the last that ever I will give, for it isn't my business," added Phillis, flustered and indignant, so much so that she dropped the letter on the floor.

By the light of a small taper there was a mutual search for it,—why mutual, Miss Gascoigne best knew. It was she who picked it up, and before she delivered it back she had clearly seen it all,—handwriting, seal, and tinted envelope, with the initials "E. U." on the corner.

Some hidden feeling in both of them, the lady and the servant, some last remnant of pity and charity, prevented their confiding openly in one another, even if Miss Gascoigne could have condescended so far. But she knew as well as if Phillis had told, and Phillis likewise was perfectly aware she knew, that the note came from Sir Edwin Uniacke.

Poor Aunt Henrietta! She was so horrified—literally horrified—that she could bear no more. She left no message—waited for nobody—but hurried back, as fast as she could walk, through twilight, to her own cottage at Avonside.

CHAPTER XIII.

'Peace on earth and mercy mild,'
Sing the angels, reconciled;
Over each sad warfare done,
Each soul-battle lost and won.

He that has a victory lost,
May discomfit yet a host;
And, it often doth befall,
He who conquers loses all.

CHRISTIAN, after sitting waiting in the study for a long hour, received a message from her husband that he would not be home that night. He had to take a sudden journey of twenty miles on some urgent affairs. This was not unusual. Dr. Grey was one of those people whom all their friends come to in any emergency; and the amount of other people's business, especially painful business, which he was expected to transact, and did transact, out of pure benevolence, was incalculable.

So his wife had to wait still. She submitted as to fatality, laid her head on her pillow, and fell at once into that dull, stupid sleep which mercifully comes to some people, and always came to her, in heavy trouble. She did not wake from it till late in the following morning.

A great dread, like a great joy, always lies in ambush, ready to leap upon us the instant we open our eyes. Had Miss Gascoigne known what a horrible monster it was, like a tiger at her throat, which sprang upon Christian when she waked that morning, she, even she, might have felt remorseful for the pain she had caused. Yet, perhaps, she would not. In this weary life of ours,—

> With darkness and the death hour rounding it,"

it is strange how many people seem actually to enjoy making other people miserable.

Christian rose and dressed. For her household ways must go on as usual; she must take her place at the breakfast-table, and make it cheerful and pleasant, so that the children might not find out anything wrong with mother. She did so, and sent them away to their morning play, — happy little souls! Then she sat down to think for a little, all alone.

Not what to do; that was already decided, but how to do it. How to tell Dr. Grey in the

least painful way, that his love had not been the first love she had received—and given; that she had had this secret, and kept it from him, though he was her husband, for six whole months.

Oh, had she but told him before her marriage,—long, long ago! Now, he might think she only did it out of fear, dread of public opinion, or seeking protection from the public scandal that might overtake her, however innocent. For was she not in the hands of an unscrupulous man and a malicious woman? It was hopeless to defend herself. Why should she attempt it? Had she not better let herself be killed,—she sometimes thought she should be killed, to so great a height of morbid dread had risen her secret agony,—and die, quietly, silently, thus escaping out of the hands of her enemies, who pursued her with this relentless hatred.

Dying might have felt easier to her; but for one fact,—she loved her husband. Loved him, as she now knew, so passionately, so engrossingly, that all this misery converged into one single fear,—the fear that she might lose his love. What the world thought of her, what Miss Gascoigne thought of her, became of little account. All she dreaded was what Dr. Grey would think. Would he, in his large, tender, compassionate heart, on hearing her confession, say·

only, "Poor thing, she could not help it, she was foolish and young;" or would he feel she had deceived him, and cast her off from his trust, his respect, his love, for evermore?

In either case she hesitated not for a moment. Love, bought by a deception, she felt to be absolutely worthless. Knowing now what love was, she knew this truth also. Had no discovery been made, she felt that she must have told all to Dr. Grey. She hated, despised herself for having already suffered day after day to pass by without telling him, though she had continually intended to do it. All this was a just punishment for her cowardice. For she saw now, as she had never seen before, that every husband, every wife, before entering into the solemn bond of marriage, has a right to be made acquainted with every secret of the other's heart, every event of the other's life. That such confidence, then and afterwards, should know no reservations, save and except trusts reposed in both before marriage by other people, which marriage itself is not justified in considering annulled.

But, the final moment being come, when a day,—half a day,—would decide it all,—decide the whole future of herself and her husband, Christian's courage seemed to return.

She sat trembling, yet not altogether hopeless; very humble, and yet strong,—with the

strength that the inward consciousness of deeply loving,—not of being loved, but of loving,—always gives to a woman; and waited till Dr. Grey came home.

When the parlour door opened, she rushed forward, thinking it was he, but it was only Phillis.

Phillis, looking insolent, self-important, contemptuous, as she held out to her mistress a letter.

"There! I've took it in for once, and given it to you, by yourself, as he bade me, but I'll never take in another. I'm an honest woman, and my master has been a good master to me."

"Phillis!" cried Mrs. Grey, astonished. But when she saw the letter she was astonished no more.

The tinted perfumed paper, the large seal, the dainty hand-writing, all were familiar of old.

Fierce indignation, unutterable contempt, and then a writhing sense of personal shame, as if she were somehow accountable for this insult, swept by turns over Christian's soul, until she recollected that she must betray nothing; for more than her own sake,—her husband's,—she must not put herself in her servant's power.

So she did not throw the letter into the fire, or stamp upon it, or do any of the frantic things she was tempted to do; she held it in her hand, like a common note, and said calmly,—

"Who brought this? and when did it come?"

"Last night, only I couldn't find you. It was nigh dropping into Miss Gascoigne's hands, and a pretty mess that would have been. And I warn you,—you had better mind what you are about,—Miss Susan Bennett told me all about it; and a nice little story it is, too, for a married lady. And Miss Gascoigne has scented it out, I'll be bound; and if Dr. Grey once gets hold of it —"

"Stop!" said Christian, firmly, though she felt her very lips turning white. "You are under some extraordinary delusion. There is nothing to be got hold of. Take this letter to my husband's study,—it is his affair. I have no communications whatever with Sir Edwin Uniacke."

Phillis looked utterly amazed. Though her mistress did not speak another word, there was something in her manner, her perfect, quiet conviction of innocence, self-asserted though without any open self-defence, which struck the woman more than any amount of anger would have done.

"If I've made a mistake, I'm sure I beg your pardon, ma'am"— began she, quite humbly.

"What for? Except for receiving and bringing to me privately a letter that should have been left with Barker at the door, it being Barker's business, and not yours. Remember that another time. Now take the letter to the study, and go."

Phillis hesitated. She looked again and again

at that calm, proud, innocent lady, whom she had so wickedly misjudged and maligned, how far and how fatally her own conscience alone could tell. And Phillis knew what innocence was, for, poor woman, she had known what it was not. Malice also she knew; and, judging her mistress by herself, she trembled.

"If you're going to bear spite against me for this, I'd best give warning at once, Mrs. Grey. Only it would nigh break my heart to leave the children."

"I have no wish for you to leave the children, and I never bear spite against anybody. Life is not long enough for it," added Mrs. Grey, sighing. Then with a sudden impulse, if by any means she could smoothe matters and win a little household peace, "I desire to be a good mistress to you, Phillis; why should you not be a good servant to me? You love the children; you are to them a most faithful nurse; why cannot you believe that I shall be a faithful mother? Let us turn over a new leaf, and begin again."

She held out her hand, and Phillis took it; looked hard in her mistress's face,—the kind friendly face, that was not ashamed to be a friend even to a poor servant. Then, with something very like a sob, she turned and ran out of the room.

But when she was gone, Christian sank down

exhausted. With a desperate self-control she had wrenched herself out of Phillis's power, she had saved herself and her husband from the suspicion that it was possible Dr. Grey's wife could receive, or give occasion to receive, a secret letter, a love-letter, from any man,—but when the effort was over she broke down. Convulsive sobs, one after the other, shook her, until she felt as if her very life were departing. And in the midst of this agony appeared—Miss Gascoigne.

Aunt Henrietta had spent the whole night, except a brief space for sleeping, in thinking over and talking over her duties and her wrongs, the two being mixed up together in indistinguishable confusion. Almost any subject, after being churned up in such a nature as hers for twelve mortal hours, would at the end look quite different from what it did at first, or what it really was. And so with all honesty of purpose, and with the firmest conviction that it was the only means of saving her brother-in-law and his family from irretrievable misery and disgrace, poor Miss Gascoigne had broken through all her habits, risen, dressed, and breakfasted at an unearthly hour, and there she stood at the Lodge-door, at nine in the morning, determined to "do her duty," as she expressed it, but looking miserably pale, and vainly restraining her agitation so as to

keep up a good appearance "before the servants."

"That will do, Barker. You need not disturb the Master; I came at this early hour just for a little chat with your mistress and the children."

And then entering the parlour, she sat down opposite to Christian to take breath.

Miss Gascoigne was really to be pitied. Mere gossip she enjoyed; it was her native element, and she had plunged into this matter of Sir Edwin Uniacke with undeniable eagerness. But now when it might be not gossip, but disgrace, her terror overpowered her. For disgrace, discredit, in the world's eye, was the only form the matter took to this worldly woman, who rarely looked on things except on the outside. Guilt, misery, and their opposites, which alone give strength to battle with them, were things too deep to be fathomed in the slightest degree by Miss Gascoigne.

Therefore, as her looks showed, she was not so much shocked as simply frightened; and had come to the Lodge with a frantic notion of hushing up the matter somehow, whatever it was. Her principal terror was, not so much the sin itself, but lest the world might hear of it.

"You see, Mrs. Grey, I am come again," said

she, very earnestly. "In spite of everything, I have come back to advise with you. I am ready to overlook everything, to try and conceal everything. Maria and I have been turning over in our minds all sorts of plans to get you away till this has blown over,—call it going to the sea-side, to the country with Arthur—anything in short, just that you may leave Avonsbridge."

"I leave Avonsbridge? Why?"

"You know why. Poor misguided girl!—you must know why. When you had a lover before your marriage,—of whom you did not tell your husband or his friends,—when this gentleman afterwards meets you, writes to you,—I saw the letter ——"

"You saw the letter!"

There was no hope. She was hunted down, as many an innocent person has been before now, by a combination of evidence; half truths, half lies;—or truths so twisted that they assume the aspect of lies, and lies so exceedingly probable that they are by even keen observers mistaken for truth. Passive and powerless, Christian sat. Miss Gascoigne might say what she would; all Avonsbridge might say what it would; she would never open her lips more.

At that moment, to preserve her from going mad—she felt as if she were; as if the whole

world were whirling round, and God had forgotten her,—Dr. Grey walked in.

"Oh, husband! save me from her,—save me,—save me!" she shrieked, again and again. And without one thought except that he was there,—her one protector, defender, and stay,—she sprang to him, and clung desperately to his breast.

And so in this unforeseen and unpremeditated manner—told how or by whom, herself, Miss Gascoigne, or both together, Christian never clearly remembered—her one secret, the one error of her sad girlhood, was communicated to her husband.

He took the revelation calmly enough, as he did everything; Dr. Grey was not the man for tragic scenes. The utmost he seemed to think of in this one was calming and soothing his wife as much as possible, carrying her to the sofa, making her lie down, and leaning over her with a sort of pitying tenderness, of which the only audible expression was, "Poor child!—poor child!"

Christian tried to see his face, but could not. She sought feebly for his hand—his warm, firm, protecting hand—and felt him take hers in it. Then she knew that she was safe.

No, he never would forsake her. He had

loved her—once and for always—with the love that has strength to hold its own through everything, and in spite of everything. Whatever she was, whatever the world might think her, she was his wife, and he loved her. She crept into her husband's bosom, knowing that it was her sure refuge, never to be closed against her until she died.

The next thing she remembered was his speaking to Miss Gascoigne—not harshly, or as if in great mental suffering, but in his natural voice.

"And now, Henrietta, just tell me the utmost you have to allege against my wife? That Sir Edwin was known to her father and herself, of which acquaintance she never told her husband; that she has accidentally met him since, a few times; and that he has been rude enough to address a letter to her? Where is it?"

It was lying on the table, for Phillis in her precipitate disappearance had forgotten it. Dr. Grey put it into his pocket unopened.

"Well, Aunt Henrietta, is that all? Have you any more to say, anything else of which to accuse my wife? Say it all out, only remember one thing, that you are saying it to a man, and about his wife."

Brief as the words were, they implied volumes. All that Dr. Grey was, and every honest man

should be, towards his wife, whom he has taken to himself, to cherish and protect, if necessary, against the whole world. Everything for which the bond of marriage was ordained, to be maintained unannulled by time, or change, or faultiness; perhaps even actual sin. One has heard of such guardianship,—of a husband pitying and protecting till death a wife who had sinned against him; and if possible to any man, this would have been possible to one like Arnold Grey.

But in his manner was not only protection, there was also love. The sort of love which passionate youth can seldom understand—but Paul the apostle did, unmarried though he was, when he spoke in such mystical language of a husband's "nourishing and cherishing" his wife, "as the Lord the Church." And now Christian seemed to comprehend this; when, looking up to her husband, she felt that he was also her "lord," ruling and guiding her, less by harsh authority than by the perfect law of love.

"Nay," she said, faintly, "don't blame your sister, she meant no harm. Nor did I. I only——"

"Hush!" Dr. Grey replied, laying his hand upon her mouth. "That is a matter solely between you and your husband."

But whether, thus met at all points, Miss Gascoigne began to doubt whether her mountain

were not a mere molehill after all, or whether she involuntarily succumbed to the influence of such honest love, such unbounded trust, and felt that to interfere further between this husband and wife would be not only hopeless, but wicked, is impossible to say. Perhaps—let us give her the credit of a good motive rather than a bad one—she really felt she had been wrong, was moved and softened, and brought to a better mind.

In any case, that happened which had never been known to happen before in Miss Gascoigne's existence,—when asked to speak she had literally nothing to say!

"Then," continued Dr. Grey, good-humouredly, still holding his wife's hand, and sitting beside her on the sofa, "this mighty matter may come to an end; which is, indeed, the best thing for it. Since I am quite satisfied concerning my wife, I conclude my sister may be. We will consider the subject closed. Make friends—you two. Christian, will you not?"

Christian rose. She had never kissed Miss Gascoigne in her life, had had no encouragement to do it, and it would have seemed a piece of actual hypocrisy. Now it was not. The kiss of affection it could hardly be, but there is such a thing as the kiss of peace.

She rose and went, white and tottering as she

was, across the room to where Miss Gascoigne sat,—hard, bitter, and silent, determined that not a step should be taken on her side—she would not be the first to "make friends."

"Forgive me, Aunt Henrietta, if I ever offended you. I did not mean it. Let us try to get on better for the future. We ought—for we are both so fond of the children and of Arnold."

Such simple words, such a natural feeling! if that hard heart were only natural and soft enough to take it in. And it was—for once.

Miss Gascoigne looked incredulously up, then down again, in a shame-faced, uncomfortable way, then held out her hand, and kissed Christian, while two tears—only two—gathered and dropped from her eyes.

But the worst was over. The ice was broken and the stream ran clear. How long it would run, good angels only could tell! But they sang, and kept on singing, all that day, in Christian's heart, the song of peace—"peace on earth,"—for the battle was over and the foes were reconciled.

CHAPTER XIV.

It may be under palace roof,
  Princely and wide;
No pomp foregone, no pleasure lost,
  No wish denied;
But if beneath the diamond's flash
  Sweet, kind eyes hide,
A pleasant place, a happy place,
  Is our fireside.

It may be 'twixt four lowly walls,
  No show, no pride;
Where sorrows oft-times enter in,
  But ne'er abide.
Yet, if she sits beside the hearth,
  Help, comfort, guide,
A blessed place, a heavenly place,
  Is our fireside.

THE very instant Miss Gascoigne was gone, Christian, throwing herself on her husband's neck, clasping him, clinging to him, ready almost to fling herself at his knees in her passion of humility and love, told him without reserve, without one pang of hesitation or shame—

perhaps, indeed, there was little or nothing to be ashamed of—everything concerning herself and Edwin Uniacke.

He listened, not making any answer, but only holding her fast in his arms, till at length she took courage to look up in his face.

"What! you are not angry, or grieved? Nay, I could fancy you were almost smiling."

"Yes, my child! Because, to tell you the plain truth, I knew all this before."

"Knew it before!" cried Christian in the utmost astonishment.

"I really did. Nobody told me. I found it out! Found it out even before I knew you. It was the strangest thing, and yet quite natural."

And then he explained to her that, after the disgraceful circumstance occurred which caused Mr. Uniacke's rustication—he had fled, from justice it might be, or in any case from the dread of it, leaving all his papers open, and his rooms at the mercy of all comers. But, of course, the Master and Dean of his College had taken immediate possession there; and Dr. Grey, being known to the young man's widowed mother, from whom he had received much kindness in his youth, was deputed by her to overlook everything, and investigate everything, if by any means his relatives might arrive at the real truth of that shameful

story which, now as heretofore, Dr. Grey passed over unexplained.

"It would serve no purpose to tell it," he said, "and it is all safely ended now."

How far his own strong, clear, common sense and just judgment had succeeded in hushing it up, and saving the young man from a ruined life, and his family from intolerable disgrace, Dr. Grey was not likely to say. But his wife guessed all, then, and afterwards.

He proceeded to tell her how, in searching these papers, among a heap of discreditable letters, he had lighted upon two or three, pure as white lilies found lying upon a refuse heap, signed, "Christian Oakley."

"I read them—I was obliged to read them—but I did so privately, and I put them in my pocket before the Dean saw them. No one ever cast eyes upon them except myself. I took them home with me and kept them. And I keep them now, for they first taught me what she was—this chosen wife of mine. They let me into the secret of that simple, gentle, innocent, girlish heart; they made me feel the worth of it, even though it was being thrown away on a worthless man. And I suspect, from that time I wanted it for my own."

He went on to say how he had first made ac-

quaintance with her,—on business grounds partly, connected with her father's sudden death, but also intending, as soon as he felt himself warranted in taking such a liberty, to return these letters, and tell her in a plain, honest, fatherly manner, what a risk she had run, and what a merciful escape she had made from this young man, who, Dr. Grey then felt certain, would never again dare to appear at Avonsbridge.

But the opportunity never came. The "fatherly" feeling was swallowed up in another, which effectually sealed the good man's tongue. He determined to make her his wife, and then the letters, the whole story, in which he had read her heart as clear as a book, and was afraid of nothing—concerned himself alone. He felt at liberty to tell her how or when he chose. At least, so he persuaded himself.

"But perhaps I, too, was a little bit of a coward, my child. I, too, might have avoided much misery if I had had the strength to speak out. But we all make mistakes sometimes—as I told you once. The great thing is not to leave them as mistakes, not to sink under them, but to recognise them for what they are, and try to remedy them if possible. Even if we married too hastily; I, because it was the only way in which I could shelter and protect my darling, and you

—well, perhaps because I over-persuaded you—still, we are happy now."

Happy! It was a word too small—any word would be. The only expression for such happiness was silence.

"And, what are we to do about him?"

"Him! who?"

Christian said it quite naturally; for woman-like, in that rapture of content, the whole world dwindled down into but two beings, herself and her husband.

Dr. Grey smiled—not dissatisfied. "I meant Sir Edwin Uniacke. May I read his letter?"

"Certainly."

She turned her face away, blushing in bitter shame. But there was no need. Either "the de'il is not so black as he's painted," or, what was more probable, that personage himself—incarnate in man's evil nature, shrinks from intruding his worst blackness upon the white purity of a good woman. Probably, never was an illicit or disgraceful love-letter written to any woman, for which she herself was quite blameless.

Dr. Grey perused, very composedly, Sir Edwin's epistle to his wife, saying at the end of it, "Shall I read this aloud? There is no reason why I should not."

And he read:—

"My dear Christian,

"If you have forgotten me, I have not forgotten you. A man does not generally meet with a girl like you twice in his lifetime. If, pressed by circumstances, I let you slip through my fingers, it was the worse for me, and, perhaps, the better for you. I bear no grudge against that worthy don and most respectable old fogie, your husband."

Christian recoiled with indignation, but Dr. Grey laughed, actually laughed, in the content of his heart, and putting his arm round his wife's waist, made her read the remainder of the letter with him.

"I have followed you pretty closely for some weeks. I cannot tell why: except that I was once madly in love with you, and perhaps I am still—I hardly know. But I am a gentleman, and not a fool either. And when a man sees a woman cares no more for him than she does for the dust under her feet; why, if he keeps on caring for her, he *is* a fool.

"The purport of this letter is, therefore, nothing to which you can have the slightest objection—it being merely a warning. There is a young woman in Avonsbridge, Susan Bennett by name, who, from an unfortunate slip of the tongue of mine, hates you, as all women do hate one another; (except one woman, whom I once had the honour

of meeting every day for four weeks: which fact may have made me a less bad fellow than I used to be, God knows,—if there is a God, and if He does know anything). Well, what I had to say is, Beware of Susan Bennett, and beware of another person, who thinks herself much superior to Bennett, and yet they are as like as two peas,—Miss Gascoigne. Defend yourself, you may need it. And as the best way to defend you, I mean immediately to leave Avonsbridge. Perhaps for personal reasons also; discretion being the better part of valour, and you being so confoundedly like an angel still. Goodbye.

"Yours truly,

"EDWIN UNIACKE."

A strange "love-letter" certainly; yet not an ill one, and one which it was better to have received than not. Better than any uncomfortable mystery to have had this clearing up of the doings and intentions of that strange, brilliant, erratic spirit which had flashed across the quiet atmosphere of Saint Bede's, and then vanished away in darkness. Darkness, not hopelessly dark. No one could believe so—at least no good Christian soul could, after reading that letter.

The husband and wife sat silent for a little, and then Dr. Grey said,—

"I always thought he was not altogether bad — there was some good in him. And he may be the better, poor fellow! all his life, for having once had a month's acquaintance with Christian Oakley."

Christian pressed her husband's hand gratefully. That little word or two carried in it a world of healing. But she was not able to say much, her heart was too full.

"And now what is to be done?" said Dr. Grey, meditatively. "He must have had some motive in writing this letter—a not unkindly motive either. He must be aware of some strong reason for it, when he tells you to 'defend yourself.' He forgets," added Christian's husband tenderly, "that now there is somebody else to do it for you."

Christian burst into tears. All her forlorn, unprotected youth, the more forlorn that in her father's lifetime it was under a certain hollow sham of protection; the total desolation afterwards, exposed to every insult of the bitter world, or at least that bitter portion of it, which is always ready to trample down a woman if she is helpless, and to hunt her down if she is strong enough to help herself;—all this was gone by for ever. She was afraid of nothing any more. She did not need to defend herself again. She had been taken out of all her misery, and placed in the safe shelter of

a good man's love. What had she done to deserve such blessedness? What could she do to show her recognition of the same? She could only weep, poor child! and feel like a child, whom the Great Father has ceased to punish,—forgiven, and taken back to peace.

"I think," she said, looking up from her hiding-place, "I am so happy, I should almost like to die."

"No, no. Not just yet, my foolish little woman," said Dr. Grey. "We have, I trust, a long lifetime before us. Mine seems only just beginning."

Strange, but true. He was forty-five and she twenty-one, and yet to both this was the real spring-time of their lives.

After a pause, during which he sat thinking rather deeply, the Master rose and rang the bell.

"Barker, do you know whether Sir Edwin Uniacke is still in Avonsbridge?"

Barker had seen him not an hour ago near the Senate-house.

"Will you go to his lodgings?—let me see, can you make out this address, my dear?" and Dr. Grey pointedly handed over the letter,—the fatal letter, which had doubtless been discussed by every servant in the house,—to his wife. "Yes, that is it. Go, Barker, present my compliments,

and say that Mrs. Grey and myself shall be happy to see Sir Edwin at the Lodge this morning."

"Very well, Master," said Barker, opening his round eyes to their roundest, as he disappeared from the room.

"What shall you say to him?" asked Christian.

"The plain truth," answered Dr. Grey, smiling. "It is the only weapon, offensive or defensive, that an honest man need ever use."

But there was no likelihood of using it against Sir Edwin, for Barker brought word that he was absent from his lodgings, and his return was quite indefinite. So in some other way must be inquired into and met this cruel gossip which had been set afloat, and doubtless was now swimming about everywhere on the slow current of Avonsbridge society.

"But perhaps it may be needless after all," said Dr. Grey, cheerfully. "We give ourselves a good deal of trouble by fancying our affairs are as important to the world as they are to ourselves. Whether or not, be content, my darling. One and one makes two. I think we two can face the world."

Long after her husband had gone to his study, and Christian had returned to her routine of household duties, one of which was teaching

Arthur and Letitia—not the pleasantest of tasks —the peace of his words remained in her heart, comforting her throughout the day. She ceased to trouble or perplex herself about what was to come; it seemed, indeed, as if nothing would ever trouble her any more. She rested in a deep dream of tranquillity, so perfect that it beautified and glorified her whole appearance. Arthur more than once stopped in his lessons to say, in his fondling way, in which to the clinging love of the child was added a little of the chivalrous admiration of the boy,—

"Mother, how very pretty you do look!"

"Do I? I am so glad!"

At which answer, Letitia, who was still prim and precise, though a little less so than she used to be, looked perfectly petrified with astonishment. And her stepmother could not possibly explain to the child why she was "so glad." Glad, for the only reason which makes a real woman care to be lovely, because she loves and is beloved.

The day wore by; the days at the Lodge went swiftly enough now, even under the haunting eyes of the pale Foundress, and the grim defunct Masters, which Christian used to fancy pursued her, and glared at her, from morning till night. Now the sad Queen seemed to gaze at her with a pensive envy, and the dark-visaged, mediæval Doctors to look after her with a good-natured

smile. They had alike become part and portion of her home,—the dear home in which her life was to pass,—and she dreaded neither them nor it, any more.

In the evening the family were all gathered together in their accustomed place, round Christian's new piano in the drawing-room. For since Miss Gascoigne's departure, she had carried out her own pleasure in a long-contested domestic feud, and persisted in using the drawing-room every night. She did not see why its pleasant splendours should gratify the public and not the family; so she let Arthur, and Letitia, and even Oliver, enjoy the sight of the beautiful room, and learn to behave themselves in it accordingly. Even towards her lovely piano, which was kept open for a full hour every evening, for a sort of family concert.

She had taken much pains, at what personal cost keen lovers of music will understand, to teach her little folk to sing. It was possible, for they had all voices, but it had its difficulties, especially when Oliver insisted on joining the concert. As he did now, tossing his curls, and opening his rosy mouth like a great round O; but, nevertheless, looking so exceeding like a singing cherub, that Christian caught him up and kissed him with a passionate delight.

And then she proceeded gravely with the

song; words and music of which she had to compose and to arrange, as she best could, so as to suit the capacity of her performers. And this was what her musical genius had come to! singing and making baby-songs for little children, to which the only chorus of applause was a faint "Bravo!" and a clapping of hands from the distant fire-side.

"Papa, we never thought you heard us. We thought when you were deep in that big book, you heard nothing."

"Indeed! Very well," said papa, and disappeared below the surface again, until he revived to take out his watch and observe that it was nearly time for little people to be safe asleep in their little beds.

Papa was always unquestioningly and instantaneously obeyed, so the young trio ceased their laughing over their funny songs, and prepared for one—a serious one—which always formed the conclusion of the night's entertainments.

Everybody knows it; most people have been taught it, the first song they ever were taught, from the mother's lips. Christian had learnt it from her mother; and it was the first thing she taught to these her children,—the Evening Hymn,—

"Glory to Thee, my God, this night."

She had explained its meaning to them, and made them sing it seriously,—not carelessly. As they stood round the piano, Titia and Atty one at each side, and Oliver creeping in to lean upon his stepmother's knee, there was a sweet grave look on all their faces, which made even the two eldest not unpretty children. For their hearts were in their faces,—their once frightened, frozen, or bad and bitter hearts. They had no need to hide anything, or be afraid of anything. They were loved. The sunshine of that sweet nature which had warmed their father's heart and made it blossom out, when past life's summer, with all the freshness of Spring, had shined down upon these poor little desolate, motherless children, and made them good and happy,—good perhaps, because they were happy—and most certainly happy because they were good.

For that mother,—their real mother, who living had been to them,—what, Christian never allowed herself to inquire, or even to speculate,—she was gone now. And being no longer an imperfect woman, but a disembodied spirit,—perhaps —who knows?—she might be looking down on them all, purified from every feeling but gladness; content that her children were taken care of, and led so tenderly into the right way.

Clear and sweet rose up their voices in the

familiar words; over which their stepmother's voice, keeping them all steady with its soft undertone, faltered more than once, especially when she thought of all the "blessings" which had come to herself since the dawning "light:"—

"Glory to Thee, my God, this night,
For all the blessings of the light.
Keep me, O keep me, King of kings
Beneath Thine own almighty wings!

Teach me to live, that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed;
Teach me to die, that so I may
With joy behold the judgment-day.

Oh, may my soul in Thee repose,
And with sweet sleep my eyelids close,
Sleep that may me more active make,
To serve my God when I awake."

The strain had just ended,—as if he had waited for its ending,—when the drawing-room door opened, and there entered for the second time into the family circle at the Lodge,—Sir Edwin Uniacke.

Certainly the young man was no coward, or he never would have entered there. When he did so, bold as he looked, with his easy "fast" air, his handsome face flushed, as if with just a little too long lingering over wine, he involun-

tarily drew back a step, apparently feeling that the atmosphere of this peaceful home was not fitted for him, or that he himself was not fitted to be present there.

"I fear I may be intruding, but I have only just received a message you sent me; I had been out all day, and I leave Avonsbridge early to-morrow," he began to say, hesitatingly, apologetically.

"I am glad to see you," said the Master. "Christian, will you send the children away? or rather, Sir Edwin, will you come to my study?"

"With pleasure," was the answer, as with an altogether perplexed air, and vainly striving to keep up his usual exceeding courtesy of manner, the young man bowed to Mrs. Grey and passed out.

"How funny! That's Sir Edwin Uniacke, Titia. The gentleman that met me, and ——"

"And that you were always talking about, till Phillis told us we mustn't speak of him any more. And I think I know why, mother," hanging down her head with rosy blushes that made the thin face almost pretty. "Mother, I think I ought to tell you—I always do tell you everything now—that that was the gentleman who met me and Miss Bennett. But I will never do anything, or meet anybody you don't like, again."

"No, dear."

"And, mother," said Arthur, sidling up to her, "don't you think, if you were to say something yourself about it, Sir Edwin would ask me again to go and see him, and let me row on the lake at Lake Hall?"

"I don't know, my boy; but I cannot speak to Sir Edwin. We must leave everything to papa—papa always knows best."

And in that firm faith, almost as simple and unreasoning as that of the child, and which, it sometimes seemed, God had specially sent this good man to teach her,—her who had hitherto had so little cause to trust or to reverence anybody,—Christian rested, as completely and contentedly as Arthur himself. Happy son and happy wife, who could so rest upon father and husband!

For nearly an hour Dr. Grey and Sir Edwin remained in the study together. What passed between them the former never told, even to his wife, and she did not inquire. She was quite certain in this, as in all other matters, that "papa knew best."

When he did come in, he found her sitting quietly sewing. She looked up hastily, but saw that he was alone, and smiled.

Dr. Grey smiled too—at least not exactly;

but there was a brightness in his face, such as—not to liken it profanely—might have been seen in the one Divine face, after saying to any sinner, "Go, and sin no more."

"My dearest," said Dr. Grey, sitting down beside his wife, and taking her hand, "you may be quite content, all is well."

"I am very glad."

"We have talked over everything, and come to a right understanding. But it is necessary to bring our neighbours to a right understanding also, and to stop people's mouths if we can. To-morrow is Sunday. I have arranged with Sir Edwin that he shall meet me in chapel, and sit with me, in face of all the world in the Master's pew. Do you dislike this, Christian?"

"No."

"We have likewise settled that he shall start off for a long tour in Greece and Egypt, with an old friend of mine, who will be none the worse for the companionship of such a brilliant young fellow. Besides, it will break off all bad associations, and give him a chance of 'turning over a new leaf,' as people say. Somehow I feel persuaded that he will."

"Thank God."

"I too say 'thank God.' For his mother was a good friend to me when I was his age. He is

only just one-and-twenty, he tells me. There may be a long successful life before him yet."

"I hope so," said Christian, earnestly. "And perhaps a happy one too. But it could never be half so happy as mine."

Thus did these two, secure and content, rejoice over the "lost piece of silver," believing, with a pertinacity that some may smile at, that it was silver after all.

"One thing more. He will be at least three years away; and no one knows what may happen to him in the meantime, he says. He would like to shake hands with you before he goes. Have you any objection to this?"

"None."

"Come then with me into the study."

They found Sir Edwin leaning against the mantel-piece, with his head resting on his arms. When he raised it, it was the same dashing, handsome head, which a painter might have painted for an angel, or an evil spirit, according as the mood seized him. But now it was the former face: with the mouth quivering with emotion, and something not unlike tears in the brilliant eyes.

"Sir Edwin, according to your desire, my wife has come to wish you goodbye, and godspeed."

Christian held out her hand, gently and gravely :—

"I do wish it you—good speed wherever you go."

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

And so they parted—these two, whose fates had so strangely met and mingled for a little while,—parted kindly, but totally, without one desire on either side that it should be otherwise. They never have met, probably never will meet, again, in this world.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

AND what became of everybody—the everybody of this simple record of six months' household history, such as might have happened in any life? For it includes no extraordinary events; and is the history of mere ordinary people, neither better nor worse than their neighbours; making mistakes, suffering for them, retrieving them, and then struggling on, perhaps to err again. Is not this the chronicle of all existence? For we are none of us either bad or good, all perfect or wholly depraved: and our merits go as often unrewarded as our sins.

Whether the future career of Sir Edwin Uniacke be fair or foul, time alone can prove. At present the chances seem in favour of the former. Especially as he has done the best thing a man of fortune—or any man who earns an honest livelihood, can do—he has married early, and, report says, married well. She is an earl's daughter, not

beautiful, and rather poor, but gentle, simple-minded, and good, as many a nobleman's daughter is, more so than girls of lesser degree and greater presumption.

Except sending marriage-cards, Sir Edwin has attempted no communication with Dr. and Mrs. Grey. Nor do they wish it. The difference between themselves and him, in wealth, rank, habits, tastes, would always make such association undesirable, even had they expected it renewed. But they did not. In their complete and contented life they had—until the marriage-cards came—almost forgotten the young man's existence.

The aunts still live at Avonside Cottage—one cultivating flowers and the other society, with equal assiduity. It is to be hoped both find an equal reward. As Aunt Henrietta grows to be no longer a middle-aged but an elderly lady, less active, less clever, and more dependent upon other people's kindness, and especially upon that of the Lodge—which never fails her—she sometimes is thought to be growing a little gentler in her manner and ways, a little less suspicious, less ill-natured, less ready to see always the black and hard side of things instead of the sunny and sweet.

At any rate, there is never now the shadow of a dispute between herself and her brother-in-law's

family; and she always talks a great deal about "dear Mrs. Grey," her elegant looks and manners (which are certainly patent to all), what a very good wife she has settled down into, and how much attached she is to the Master. Even darkly hinting—in moments confidential—that, "to my certain knowledge," Mrs. Grey had, as Christian Oakley, the opportunity of making an excellent marriage with a gentleman of family and position, who was devotedly in love with her, but whom she refused for the love of Dr. Arnold Grey.

Which statement, when she came to hear it, —which, of course she did: everybody hears everything in Avonsbridge—only made Christian smile; half amused, half sad, to think how strangely truth can be twisted sometimes, even by well-meaning people, who are perfectly convinced in their own minds and consciences that they never tell a lie, and wouldn't do such a thing for the world.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Grey sighed, and wondered if there was any absolute truth and absolute goodness to be found anywhere, except in her own husband—her well-beloved and honoured husband.

He is "turnin' auld" now, like John Anderson in the song, and the great difference in age between himself and his wife is beginning to tell

every year more plainly; so that she thinks sometimes with a sharp pain and dread, of her own still remaining youth, fearing lest it may not be the will of God that they two should "totter down" the hill of life together. But she knows that all things—death and life included—are in His safe hands, and that "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

It has pleased Him to drop one other bitter drop into what would otherwise have been the entire sweetness of Christian's overflowing cup. She has no children; that is, no children of her very own. Year by year, that hope of motherhood, in all its exquisite bliss, slipped away. At last it had quite to be let go, and its substitute accepted—as we most of us have, more or less, to accept the will of Heaven instead of our will, and go on our way resignedly, nay, cheerfully, knowing that, whether we see it or not, all is well.

Christian Grey had to learn this lesson, and she did learn it, not at first, but gradually. She smothered up all regrets in her silent heart, and took to her bosom those children which Providence had sent her. She devoted herself entirely to them, brought them up wisely and well; and in their love and their father's she was wholly satisfied.

THE END.

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